

## Meet Author and Advocate Ken Kunken



Left: Ken at work at Abilities, Inc. at The Viscardi Center Right: Ken with his wife and three sons. Photos courtesy of Ken Kunken.

Storytelling is a key part of creating connections and understanding, and it's central to our work at *Able News*. As we continue to build our platform for amplifying stories of the disability community, we're delighted to introduce this new interview series. To kick things off, we had a conversation with Ken Kunken, a Long Island-based attorney, author, disability advocate, husband, and father. His book, *I Dream of Things That Never Were: The Ken Kunken Story*, was published late last year. Here, in his own words, Ken shares a bit about his life and the wisdom he's gathered along the way.

### **Congratulations on recently publishing a book! What can readers expect?**

I had been planning on writing a book for quite some time. I had a lot of people encourage me to do so. I've been doing motivational speaking for a number of years and after almost every one of my talks somebody would suggest that I write a book. I've been told that what I've done with my life since my injury has both

motivated people to do more with their lives. I'd really like to get my message out and highlight the importance of family, friends, everybody who has helped me achieve far more than anybody thought I would ever be able to do.

### **How would you say things have changed for people with disabilities in the time since sustaining your injury?**

I had a spinal cord injury back in 1970. I broke my neck making a tackle on a kickoff at a lightweight football game against Columbia University when I had just started my junior year at Cornell University. I had the added misfortune of being injured about 20 years before the Americans with Disabilities Act took effect. When I went back to school after my injury, almost nothing was wheelchair accessible. At Cornell, there was not one ramp or curb cut on the entire campus and every building had steps in front of it. One of my main concerns was just getting to and from class safely and being able to navigate all the physical obstacles that were involved.

### **We know that discrimination toward people with disabilities remains all too common when it comes to employment opportunities. What guidance would you share with disabled people who are navigating a job search?**

It's great to make it known to as many people as you can that you're looking for a job and what type of job you're pursuing so that you may be able to get some guidance from other people who have already been working in that job. I think it's very important to be realistic in the job that you're looking for. And I think it's important that employers be encouraged to hire qualified individuals who happen to have a disability. Everybody benefits by having a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

### **What disability rights issue is your biggest advocacy priority right now?**

For years and years there have been disincentives for somebody with a disability to work. So many individuals with disabilities need Medicaid and Social Security

benefits. But when they get a competitive job, they can lose those benefits, which jeopardizes access to attendant care. We have to change this so that people are encouraged to go to work rather than stay home for fear of losing those benefits.

### **Looking ahead, what's next in your exciting journey?**

I'd been working as an assistant district attorney in Nassau County. I'd been there for more than 41 years. I've decided now is the right time for me to fully retire. What's next? I have three sons in college and I'm looking forward to watching their growth and helping them in any way that I can. I'm also looking forward to doing more speaking about my book so that I can encourage people, whether they be people with disabilities, family members of people with disabilities, friends of people with disabilities, employers or just the public in general to learn more about disability. We must continue moving toward a society that values everyone, including people with disabilities.