

U N I V E R S I T Y O F P I T T S B U R G H

FACETS

SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND REHABILITATION SCIENCES SPRING/SUMMER 2009

BUILDING a better child





It isn't surprising that throughout the past 40 years the people who have made the biggest strides in disability research and rights have been people with disabilities themselves. Until the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law in 1990, the U.S. had a less than stellar track record of addressing the rights of this group. And it has only been within the last 25 years that funding, research, and academic instruction into disabilities have come together to make significant headway in addressing problems and discovering solutions.

It took early pioneers to begin shaping the disciplines that we now know as occupational therapy, rehabilitation science and technology, and rehabilitation counseling. Not only do young fields need scientists and researchers, they also need advocates and devoted educators – people to push the boundaries of the current knowledge and begin training the next generation of leaders. In the field of rehabilitation counseling, Dr. Robert Chubon, an early alumnus of the rehabilitation counseling program at Pitt, is one of those leaders.

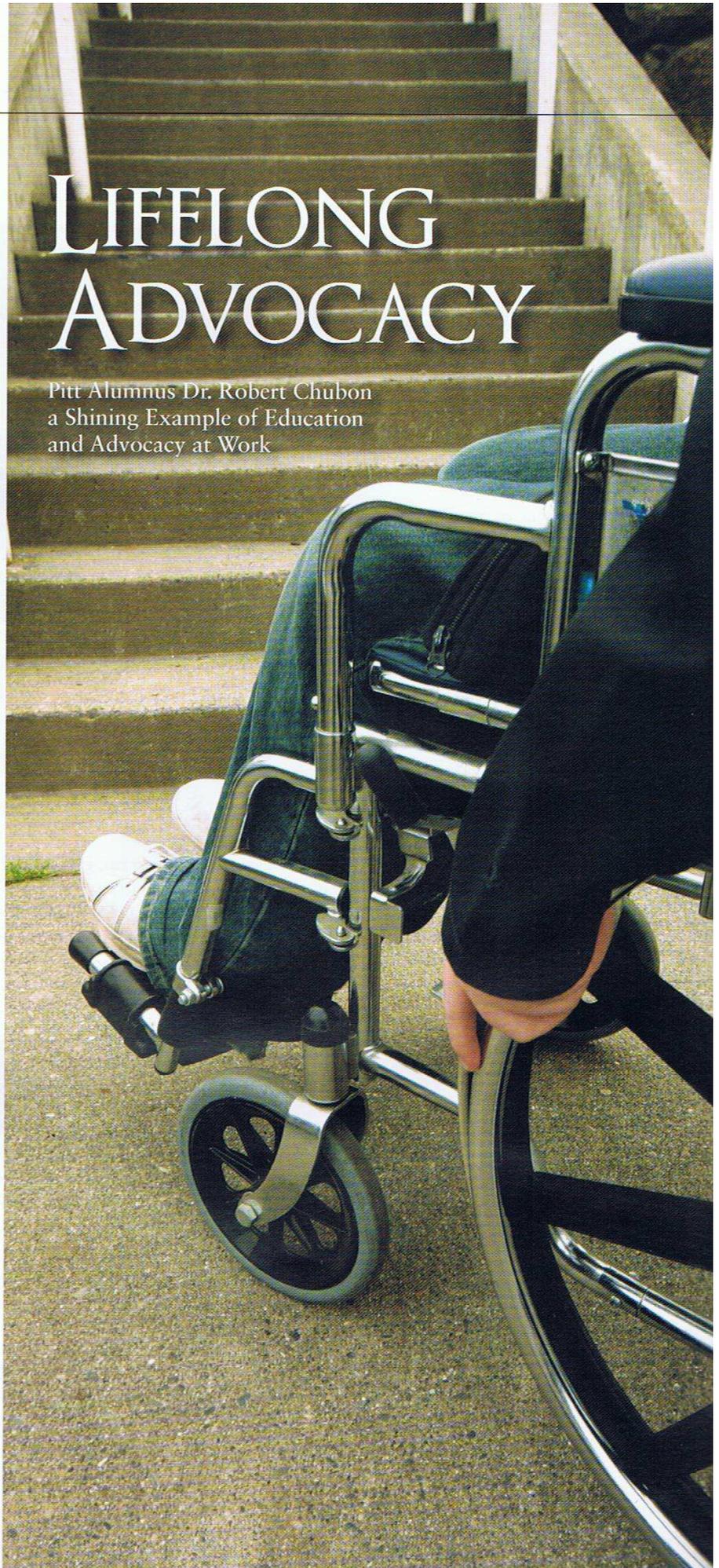
An Early Start

Chubon became disabled at a relatively early age after a freak trampoline accident left him with a spinal cord injury in his senior year of high school. The year was 1954 and little was known about how to treat spinal cord injuries. But Chubon slowly overcame the challenges it posed. It took nearly 10 years.

He remembers, "I went from an athletic 16-year-old with a Navy ROTC scholarship nearly in hand to someone struggling with the challenges of a disability. While the treatment for my spinal cord injury was better than it would have been 10 years before, due largely to the advances that came out of

LIFELONG ADVOCACY

Pitt Alumnus Dr. Robert Chubon
a Shining Example of Education
and Advocacy at Work



World War II, it was still a long road. At that age, emotionally, it was a nightmare; but in the end I made it.”

Much of his initial rehabilitation was accomplished at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in West Orange, NJ, and the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, Va., pioneers in the rehabilitation field. However, the real breakthrough occurred in 1960 at St. Francis Medical Center’s Department of Rehabilitation Medicine in Pittsburgh.

He was unable to finish his senior year in the months following his injury because, in those days, Chubon was considered too disabled to benefit from even homebound instruction. Despite the lack of a high school diploma, his rehab therapists – who by now had become his advocates – urged him to apply to Pitt. “To say they treated me like family is an understatement.” His SAT scores and solid high school grades won him acceptance. With the support and encouragement from the St. Francis and Pitt staffs, he started at Pitt in the fall of 1961.

The schooling went well for Chubon, despite his limited ability to write. But, he says he studied relentlessly and relied on in-class focus and a good memory. The first two years were a struggle, having to cope with the physical barriers and a deficient high school education, but he was able to raise his grades to a level acceptable for admission to graduate school. The biggest challenge, he explains, was getting to class.

“There were no accessible entrances or elevators in many of the buildings at Pitt in those days and certainly no ramps. So for example, I had to rely on the football team to get me up and down the dorm steps. At that time, I was the first residential student in a

wheelchair to have ever attended Pitt so you can imagine how that situation made me feel. I was well aware that my success or failure would determine if others with disabilities like mine would follow.”

By his junior year, the University had built three wheelchair-accessible dorms and by the time he graduated, 13 residential students using wheelchairs were attending Pitt.

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Experience that Counts

Chubon continued on to earn a Master’s degree from Pitt in rehabilitation counseling and began working with people with disabilities at St. Francis Medical Center. Within two years, he became the administrator of the Rehabilitation Medicine Department where he used his background and experience to refine and expand the program. As a result of guest lecturing at Pitt, he was persuaded to become a full-time educator and earned a doctorate from Pitt in 1979. In 1980, Chubon and his wife, Sandra (NURS ’66, GSPH ’69), moved to Columbia, S.C., where he was an educator-researcher at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine for the next 21 years.

Chubon has written a well-known text book on rehab counseling entitled “The Social and Psychological Foundations of Rehabilitation,” and has authored dozens of peer-reviewed articles on the subject. He also has received wide

recognition and praise for a keyboarding system he invented for people with disabilities. Chubon reorganized the keys on a standard computer keyboard so that the most frequently typed letters are arranged close to the middle of the keyboard, making it easier for people with limited finger dexterity or for those who use a typing stick as he does. He also has gained international recognition for his work in the area of quality of life assessment. And his most current passion, as an author and playwright, has been consuming him in retirement. He’s written numerous plays and short stories and is working on an Internet Web-based memoir.

But in the end, his life’s work has been in helping people with disabilities to live better lives – and educating both professionals and the public at large to do the same for others.

His long road toward full rehabilitation as a young person shaped him as a man and shaped him as a teacher. “Adapting to my disability was a challenge and I’ve committed my whole life to helping others in the same way that I was helped, with compassion and with a total commitment to understanding the challenge, while at the same time challenging the individual,” he explains.

He also credits the opportunity he was given at Pitt for making all the difference in his life and his career. Without it, he admits, his path could have been quite different.

“I’ve always been deeply indebted to the University of Pittsburgh for the education and the opportunity, and I’ve done my best throughout my life to extend that opportunity to others with disabilities. In the end, that’s what counts the most. I have been both proud of and grateful for the leadership Pitt demonstrated by accepting me.” ❁