SDM SIDEBAR:

During the 2017 legislative session in Tennessee, the Council collaborated with a workgroup of other disability organizations on a bill that would make Supported Decision-Making a formal option for those who need assistance making decisions. The bill is called “The Supported Decision-Making Agreement Act (SB264 / HB941)”. Tennessee State Senator Becky Massey (R-Knoxville) and State Representative Mike Carter (R-Ooltewah) sponsored the bill, with support by The Arc Tennessee. The bill is modeled after a law enacted recently in Texas. Tennessee would be the third state in the nation, after Texas and Delaware, to pass legislation related to supported decision-making.

What does the bill do?

The purpose of the bill, as it was introduced, is “to define and authorize a legal option for adults with disabilities who seek assistance in making certain decisions about their lives, such as financial, medical, and other life decisions, but choose to retain their rights as the ultimate decision-maker about those decisions rather than seeking a legal representative to make such decisions on their behalf.” During legislative session, there was much debate over how SDM should be operationalized in Tennessee. The first draft of the bill was modeled after legislation passed in Texas, which dictated an official agreement form which must be signed by both the person with a disability and the supporter and publicly notarized. However, legal experts and advocates alike raised concerns about prescribing such a form - both because it feels like a ‘one size fits all’ method and because of concern it would not be accepted in the very situations it’s intended to be used, like doctor’s offices and banks.

What happens next?

Ultimately, the sponsors of the bill decided to defer the bill to “Summer Study”, which is a special session for the committee members that will take place before the next legislative session begins, for the purpose of brainstorming ways to improve the bill so that it works as intended: as an option for people who are capable of making their own decisions to still access assistance. Tennessee’s legislative session is a two-year timeframe, so bills that are deferred this way are still considered “alive” and do not have to be re-introduced. The Council’s Executive Director and Public Policy Director will remain closely involved throughout the summer study process and the next session of the legislature.

Blind Athlete “Grows” with Achilles Running Program

by Ned Andrew Solomon

Stephanie Zundel became blind at age three, due to an allergic reaction to Children’s Motrin. This development did not hold her back for long.

In 3rd grade Stephanie started taking karate, specifically White Tiger Kenpo, a mixed martial art. Over time she earned her Junior and Senior Black Belts, and was immersed in the sport through high school. She also began boxing at age 10 – a sport Stephanie still does today, though she’s more inclined to go the kickboxing route.

“When I was home in New Jersey I belonged to a boxing gym close to my house,” said Stephanie. “I went with one of my karate instructors – he’s the one who introduced me. I wouldn’t do it necessarily to fight people; it was more for a good workout.”

Stephanie would move through all the various boxing stations – the speed bag, the heavy bag, the double end bag. Then she would go into the ring with the instructor and he’d teach her how to use different combinations. Stephanie was able to do most of this without sighted support.

“Sometimes I needed help finding which stations were empty,” she explained. “During the actual station activities I didn’t need help. When I was in the boxing ring working through the different combinations, the instructor who was working with me would clap his mitts, so I could hear where he was going. A lot of times I didn’t need him to clap – I just used my ears to hear where he was.”

In high school, Stephanie expanded her athletic pursuits to include track. She just trained with the team, doing warm-ups and mile runs, instead of competing. When she moved to Nashville for her sophomore year of college at Vanderbilt University, her roommates signed up for the Country Music Half Marathon, and asked Stephanie if she’d like to join them.

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Stephanie was still not a big fan of running, much preferring other types of exercise. But she eventually said, “yes”, signed up and began to train regularly, because, if you know anything about Stephanie, she never does anything halfway. “Then, one of my blind friends told me that she had joined Achilles, and was training for the same race,” she recalled. “So I asked what Achilles was.”

Achilles International was established in 1983 by Dick Traum, a runner with a prosthetic leg, to encourage other people with disabilities to participate in mainstream athletics. Achilles provides support, training, and technical expertise to runners at all levels. Their international, national and local chapters include athletes with all kinds of disabilities, such as blindness, stroke, cerebral palsy, paraplegia, traumatic head injury, and many others. With the support of volunteer guides, athletes participate in workouts and races using crutches, wheelchairs, hand cycles, prostheses, or without aid at all.

Achilles International Nashville is the local chapter of Achilles International. The second largest chapter behind New York, Achilles Nashville has over 200 registered volunteer guides and over 100 registered athletes. Athletes with disabilities take part in athletic events in order to promote personal achievement, enhance self-esteem, and lower barriers to living a fulfilling life. Volunteer Guides come from all walks of life, and help the runners with disabilities navigate the environment in many ways, including functioning as an athlete’s eyes, ears, navigational guide, and motivator; helping with special equipment such as a tether or hand cycle; and providing race-day logistics such as pinning on a number, navigating through the crowd to the start line, and ultimately across the finish line.

At the time, conveniently, the Nashville Achilles program was conducting Saturday morning runs near Vanderbilt, so Stephanie joined them for one and really enjoyed it. “All the people were so great, and so sweet,” said Stephanie. “At that point I still wasn’t into running as much. But I decided to stick with Achilles because I really wanted a consistent running schedule, and they would definitely help with that, with their regular Wednesday night and Saturday morning runs.”

Soon after, Stephanie ran the Country Music Half Marathon with Volunteer Guide, Harvey Freeman. “After I ran my first half-marathon, something just clicked,” Stephanie said. “I really loved running. Rather than it being something that stressed me out, it was something that helped me de-stress.”

Since then, Stephanie has made the rounds. With Harvey and her other regular Volunteer Guide, Amy Harris, Stephanie has run a number of smaller races in Nashville, a Princess Half marathon in Disneyworld, the New York City Marathon this past November, and the Boston Marathon in April. “And now running is one of my biggest passions, ever,” she said. “I just find it very freeing. I kind of think of running as my ‘me time’. It’s not like a team sport, where you’re worrying, ‘if I don’t meet this goal or do this it’s going to impact other people’. I’m working on strengthening myself. It’s my time to just de-stress from the day, enjoy life, and focus on me being happy.”

“I really love Achilles,” continued Stephanie. “I’ve made so many great friendships. The athletes definitely benefit a whole lot from the guides, but I think the guides benefit from the athletes too.
Achilles never pressures you to do something you don’t want to do. You grow with Achilles. Some people do marathons, some do 5-Ks, some people work on speed, some on distance. Everybody’s doing different things, but everyone gets along so well.”

Besides participating in two of the country’s biggest marathons, Stephanie can now add Vanderbilt graduate to her growing list of accomplishments. Having majored in Child Studies and minoring in Special Education and Sociology, Stephanie was recently accepted into Vanderbilt’s School Counseling graduate program.

“For me, training for and running the New York City and Boston Marathons has really taught me about perseverance,” Stephanie said. “Even though School Counseling doesn’t have to do with running or exercise, I think the lessons that running teaches me has a lot to do with what I’m going to do in my future. Remembering how it felt to persevere throughout the NYC Marathon – when it got really hilly, and when I was doing those big bridges, when I thought it was too hard and I just wanted to give up. That relates a lot to the situations that these children are going to be going through - not running and going up hills, but going through hardships, and the different challenges that life will present them. I hope to teach them about that perseverance, and not to give up even if you feel like you really want to. You have to continue to fight your battles because you can accomplish huge things that you don’t think you're going to be able to along the way.”

For more information on Achilles, visit www.achillesnashville.org.

Remembering Leaders in Our Community

Rick Davis
Council member Rick Davis passed away on April 2 after several months of complications following a surgery in October. Rick served on the Council since being appointed by Governor Haslam in August 2012 to represent the Southeast Development District. He lived in Hixson and worked as a Business Specialist at the TVA Sequoyah Nuclear Plant. He was a graduate of Memphis State University, with a degree in Mathematical Sciences.

He played for and coached The Chattanooga Speeders, a power wheelchair soccer team, and was very passionate about sports. Rick previously served on the Tennessee Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC of Tennessee), the CARTA Board for Accessible Transportation and was a recipient of the United Way Courage Award.

In a 2012 interview for Breaking Ground about his appointment to the Council, we asked Rick about his greatest success as a person with a disability. He shared: “My greatest success is my spirit of independence. I have a job, own my home, and just last year embarked on the independent trip of a lifetime.” Rick traveled on his own to Washington, D.C. to see his favorite singer, Glen Campbell, perform on his goodbye tour. The Council staff and members will miss Rick and his independent spirit greatly.

Tracey McCartney
The Council extends our sympathies to our partners at the Tennessee Fair Housing Council on the passing of their Executive Director, Tracey McCartney, on April 11. Since joining the Tennessee Fair Housing Council in February 1998, Tracey provided exemplary leadership, management, and legal service for the Housing Council. She was a dedicated advocate for expanding housing opportunities to all, including those with disabilities. She was a great partner in our work to support the annual Fair Housing Conference to include a focus on disability issues and to involve individuals with disabilities in fair housing work.

Kimmie Jones
Kimmie (Kimberly) Jones, social media and outreach coordinator for Tennessee Disability Pathfinder, passed away on April 4 after a brief illness. We extend our sympathies to our colleagues at Pathfinder and Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, and Kimmie’s friends and family.

Wanda Willis, our Executive Director shared about Kimmie: “Kimmie was a pleasure to work with – she was bright, creative and dedicated to her work, and always willing to assist others. She elevated Pathfinder’s visibility and impact, reaching new audiences through social media and storytelling. Her unique voice and contributions will be missed by the Council and the broader Tennessee disability community.”