

## Adapting Adventure

**Joel Berman helps adapt  
outdoor adventure for  
the disabled**

**By Dawn Klingensmith**

**Joel Berman does not shy away** from questions about his disability. He'll tell you the long version or the short version, whichever you prefer, of how he lost his left leg in a 1984 railroad accident in Chicago. He'll tell you about his artificial leg—it's mechanical, like a car, and requires frequent tune-ups—and how he sometimes resorts to fixing it with duct tape.

However, whenever Berman encounters other people with disabilities (which happens often, given his occupation), he seldom asks them what happened. "And if I'm told, I always forget," he says. "To me, what happened doesn't matter. What matters is how you're going to move forward."

Berman, 42, is co-founder and executive director of Adaptive Adventures, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of the disabled and their families through outdoor sports and recreation. Prior to his accident, he'd been active in an array of sports, including track, football, wrestling, tennis, basketball, softball, kayaking and sailing. He used a wheelchair for a full year after losing his leg, but he gradually learned to participate, with a prosthesis.

After 10 years in the corporate world, Berman moved to Colorado, where he volunteered with a number of adaptive sports programs to teach paddle sports, water and snow skiing, and sailing. Combining his business acumen with his volunteer experience, he co-founded Adaptive Adventures in 1999 in Colorado.

Last year, Adaptive Adventures opened a full-time office in Chicago, and Berman returned with his wife and kids to his hometown of Wilmette to run it. Berman realized the need for a local office when a Chicago woman contacted his organization three years ago. She had multiple sclerosis, and though she could no longer walk, she wanted to continue riding bikes with her husband. Because her arms were fully functional, a hand-pedaléd cycle was the obvious answer, but

Berman called one local organization after another and could not find one. Finally, he stumbled upon Creative Mobility in St. Charles, offering custom-built wheelchairs and adaptive sports equipment, with an emphasis on cycles.

Creative Mobility came through for the woman, but Berman was left with a burning question: In a city of this size, how can it be that hard to find a hand cycle?

Adaptive Adventures' local office works with other area organizations to match disabled people with appropriate recreational opportunities and equipment.

Recently, Adaptive Adventures was featured

on the Fox TV program, *Renovate my Life*, which featured a Lemont family whose home needed to be extensively remodeled for wheelchair accessibility after the 17-year-old son broke his back. To further improve the boy's quality of life, Berman taught him how to ride a hand-powered cycle.

Since the start of the war in Iraq, Berman also has met

with 20 to 30 veterans who have lost limbs. "Because of the war, there's this whole new influx of young, active amputees, so we're seeing an increased demand for the types of services we provide," he says.

Enacted in phases, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 also is increasing demand for Adaptive Adventures' services. A third phase calling for more outdoor recreational opportunities recently went into effect.

Adaptive Adventures offers programs all over the United States and as far away as Japan, where the organization helped a government agency implement a hand-cycling program.

Through charitable giving, Adaptive Adventures is able to offer its programs for free or for nominal fees to disabled participants and their families. For more information, visit [www.adaptiveadventures.org](http://www.adaptiveadventures.org), or call 847-251-8445. ○



*Joel Berman taught snow skiing with a number of adaptive sports programs before co-founding Adaptive Adventures in '99.*

*Courtesy of Adaptive Adventures*