

Possibilities Are Endless For Chris Kaag



Chris Kaag is an ambitious, athletic and determined man. A former marine, Kaag enjoys living life to the fullest. Mountain biking, skiing, and kayaking are some of the many hobbies Kaag does on any given day. This adventurous man lets nothing discourage him in being an active member of society – not even his disability.

In 1997, Kaag was an active 21-year-old marine and enjoyed playing the intense game of rugby, biking high mountains, and leading a boundless life.

While serving in the military overseas in Italy, Kaag went out for his daily run; he was preparing for a physical fitness test. He noticed his legs weren't functioning normally, but continued to train for the test. When his time recorded at a whopping five minutes past his personal best, Kaag knew something was wrong and he sought medical attention. Kaag returned to the United States and spent nine weeks in the hospital as doctors determined what was causing his symptoms. His life drastically changed in 1998 when he was diagnosed with Adrenomyeloneuropathy (ă-drē'nō-mī'ě-lō-nū-rop'ă-thē), or AMN. It is a degenerative, inherited nerve condition that would eventually affect his ability to walk. Kaag did not lose his ability to walk instantly; instead the process was gradual. First, he began to lose the ability to run and then started losing his balance regularly. He began using crutches to walk and then two canes to mobilize. Five years ago he began to use a wheelchair.



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While his life gradually started to change, Kaag decided he would redefine what it means to live well. Kaag began to participate in physical activities that were more demanding and challenging than sports he participated in before his disability. When asked what kind of sports he takes part in today, he said, "The activities I do now are similar if not more physically demanding than the activities I did in the past. Just because I have a disability doesn't mean I'm any less capable than an able bodied person."

The philosophy that "anything is possible" has stayed with Kaag ever since his diagnosis. He has never slowed down. "I'm more active than I was before my AMN set in. These days, I want to push myself and lead an active and fulfilling life."

Kaag exceeds expectations every day. In 2007, he created the IM ABLE Foundation to promote and demonstrate to individuals with disabilities that it's possible to lead physically adventurous lives. Kaag's reason for starting the foundation was to "show people that they can overcome the obstacles that may come with disabilities. People shouldn't dwell on what they can't do with their disability; instead, they should focus on what they can do. A large focus of mine is also raising awareness with children. I want to show them that the possibilities are endless and they can live adventurously despite a disability."

Every February, Kaag and the IM ABLE Foundation host the "***Are You Able Challenge?***" This event aims to open the eyes of the public and change the perceptions some may have towards people with disabilities. It helps to show people without disabilities what people with disabilities experience on a daily basis. Typically participants are able bodied individuals (but are not limited to) and they engage in football, hockey, golf, basketball and other obstacles while using a wheelchair.

In addition, the foundation holds a triathlon, "***Got The Nerve?***" which consists of a run, bike and swimming competition. "With events like these, I hope to raise awareness of the foundation and spread the word to all people with disabilities. If people dig deep, they can accomplish anything," said Kaag.

Despite his inability to walk, he continues to hold his head high, push further to achieve excellence, and redefine what it means to have a disability. Kaag keeps himself busy and even owns his own gym. As each day passes, he pushes the limit. "I want to change and alter how people look at individuals with disabilities," stated Kaag.

One thing is for sure, IM ABLE has a strong and determined leader, and with Kaag and the help of others, the foundation's purpose will continue to spread and show people with disabilities that nothing is out of reach.

To learn more about the IM ABLE Foundation, visit www.getupandmove.org.

Get Cookin' at Three Rivers Center for Independent Living!

Do you love the Food Network and wish you could cook like the Iron Chefs? Well you're in luck; Three Rivers Center for Independent Living (TRCIL) now offers a cooking class! Whether you are a gourmet chef and want to polish your skills, or you have never touched a skillet in your life, TRCIL's "Healthy, Delicious, Easy Cooking" class is for you!

TRCIL's Information and Referral Specialist (and cooking fanatic), Cindy Williams, along with other TRCIL staff, developed a cooking course in 2009 after seeing a growing interest in healthy cooking. The first program was held May through September 2009 with one lesson per month. The title, "Healthy, Delicious, Easy Cooking" tells you exactly what the course is like - simple, fun, and good for you! Williams wants to teach people that it's not hard to cook delicious, healthy, and affordable food. When asked what her favorite dish to cook is, Williams responded with a chuckle, "That's like asking a parent which one is your favorite child!"

Who can participate?

All members of TRCIL's *Living Well With A Disability* program may attend. At the first class, participants will receive a binder filled with recipes and articles that they may take home! Classes are free and accessible to all. Personal assistants are welcome if needed.

What is the layout and what kind of food will I cook?

During each class participants learn to cook an entrée, side dish, and dessert. Dishes prepared in the past included lasagna, chili, stir fry, and pizza. Every meal has meat

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and vegetarian options, and at the end of the lesson the group heads to the dining room to enjoy their creations! In the future, Williams hopes to incorporate more foods from different cultures and backgrounds while still keeping it healthy, easy, and affordable.

Participants are also encouraged to bring in their favorite recipes to share with the class!

When is it?

The class takes place once a month and the next round of classes should begin this fall. Each class is limited to 10 people, so it is important to R.S.V.P. before each class. Contact Cindy Williams at cwilliams@trcil.org or 412-371-7700 ext. 136 for more information, and to sign up for fall classes. If you cannot attend the class, Williams says, “experiment and always trust your instincts!”

What if I don't live in Allegheny, Armstrong or Westmoreland counties? How can I find cooking classes?

If you don't live in the counties TRCIL serves, but you're interested in cooking classes, call the *Living Well With A Disability* hotline (1-877-865-4893) and we'll help you find what you need to get started!

Getting Children with ADD/ADHD Learning Disabilities Ready to Go Back to School

According to the United States Census Bureau, approximately 7.5% of school-aged children in the United States have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These learning disabilities affect a child's ability to stay focused, pay attention, and complete tasks. For many parents of children with ADD or ADHD, sending a child back to school may cause temporary anxiety and new levels of stress and worry. *Living Well With A Disability* can assist you in finding the resources and information you may need to make a smooth transition from summer vacation to the classroom.

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How to Prepare Your Child to Go Back to School

For some, the shock of going back to school after a summer of lounging by the pool is a bit emotional. Preparing your child mentally and emotionally for the school year can make or break a child's first day back at school. Here are some tips to make the transition back to school smoother!

1. Keep your child active throughout the summer; have books and academic activities for them to engage in. (If this hasn't been done yet, gradually start now before school starts).
2. If they're a new student, take them on a tour of the school before the first day of classes.
3. If possible, introduce your child to their new teacher prior to the first day.
4. Encourage independence for daily tasks and assign appropriate chores around the house.
5. Incorporate the things he or she will be learning at school into their daily activities. For example, if your child is going into 3rd grade and will be learning multiplication, ask them to multiply the fruits and veggies on their dinner plate. (This should be done year-round.)

10 Homework Tips for Parents

Staying involved with your child's schoolwork at home is important in helping them succeed academically. Following these tips may help your child conquer their homework.

1. Have your child complete his or her homework at the same location every day with no distractions (television, telephone, pets, etc.).
2. At the beginning of the year, create a homework supply kit and make sure it is always filled with everything your child will need to stay on task (ex: paper, pens, pencils, markers).
3. Stick to a routine. Homework should be done at the same time each day and there should be specific rules in place that each parent, sibling, and child should know.

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4. Keep organized. Use color-coded folders and notebooks and introduce your child to a calendar. It's a good habit to start early! Also, ask your child to pack their book bag at night instead of the morning.
5. Teach your child mnemonic phrases. Example: When learning the notes on a music staff many teachers tell their students to remember: **Every Good Boy Does Fine.**
6. Take frequent, short breaks throughout homework time to avoid your child getting too tired.
7. Start homework projects early so they are spaced out. This will help reduce stress on your child and you!
8. Provide positive feedback and encouragement!
9. Create specific, attainable, and timely goals for your child to focus on.
10. Use a timer or hourglass to help your child stay focused during homework time.

It is important to be patient and always stay positive. If you are frustrated, think how frustrated your child may be. By staying positive and showing how much you love school, your child will learn the same!

To find more resources on how to prepare your child for school, call the *Living Well With A Disability* Hotline at 1-877-TO-LIV-WELL. A *Living Well With A Disability* specialist can work with you to get the resources you need!