

# The Winner's Circle

by David Block

## Special-ed Teacher Michelle White Develops Greater empathy for Students after Spinal Cord Injury

The destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 was one of the bleakest days in the history of the U.S. While Americans struggled to adjust, fourth-grade Special-ed instructor Michelle White of Lebanon, Pennsylvania's Ebenezer Elementary School had a different set of challenges, because nine days earlier on September 2, a parachuting accident left her paralyzed from the chest down.

"Because of my surgeries, I wasn't conscious enough to watch TV, or to know what was happening," said White. "I was in intensive care." It was weeks before she comprehended the 9/11 tragedy.

After regaining full consciousness, she had to learn how redo simple things; such as using a fork, toothbrush, marker and computer.

While recovering, White wrote [New Opportunities](#), a self-published children's book about Spiney the porcupine, who, as White phrased it, "on a beautiful, late summer afternoon headed out with a friend for an excursion on a small craft." Just like the one in which White rode.

"The character in the book is me," said White. "It was a tool for me to use; to say to my students, 'here's what happened to me, here's how I made it through and here's what I'm doing now.' I named the character Spiney because that's what my family started calling me after my spinal cord injury. That nickname didn't bother me. In fact, I thought it was funny. When I chose a character, I picked a porcupine because it's a creature with spines on it."

She figured out an alternative method to write her book:

"I hit a retractable marker with my chin because I could no longer push the button down. I had to rely on the marker because now I don't have enough muscles to push down with a pen or pencil...It was good practice because my handwriting's gotten better. It's not award winning, but my students can read what I

write on their papers."

When White resumed teaching, she let her colleagues and students know that she was okay with her disability. She also never hesitated to ask for help.

White elaborated: "I encourage people to ask questions about my disability. I learned that the people most comfortable with disabilities have been kids. They're not afraid to ask questions, to touch my hands and ask why my fingers are curled. The younger the kids, the less inhibited because they haven't had enough experience of being told not to ask questions. Adults are the complete opposite. They seem less comfortable with disability. Some are afraid to look at you or ask a question that might offend you in any kind of way. Being a special-ed teacher helped me become more comfortable with peoples' questions. I want people to understand that if someone's a little bit different, I want them to know what they might be dealing with, and just move on."

White said that she is a better Special-ed teacher now than before her spinal cord injury:

"You can get training on how to teach kids with disabilities. You can read books about it, but it's not the same as having one. Before my accident, I never knew what it was like to be missing something or having to deal without something. After my accident, I experienced frustrations of trying to accomplish simple things that were now difficult. When I returned to the classroom and saw the kids that I worked with that needed extra help with reading and math, I then truly saw how it is a struggle. Even though their struggles are academic and mine is physical, I understood the struggle that they go through to get what they need in a lot of their learning. Now, I can see frustration differently. Before my accident, I'd give the kids, example after example after example. Now I realize that they would need a quick little break away from it and then we'd revisit it again."

To order White's book, *New Opportunities*, log onto Amazon.



Michelle White