

# The Winner's Circle

by David Block

## MDI Men Rally Behind Fellow Member with MS

When 51-year-old trial attorney Howard Spierer of Milford, NJ developed Multiple Sclerosis, (MS) back in 1997, one of his biggest challenges was learning to accept help.

"I still don't know if I've learned to fully accept help from people," said Spierer. "I do now because it's harder for me to walk."

This past spring Spierer's ability to accept help was thoroughly tested, as fifty to sixty fellow members of Men's Division International, MDI, an organization where fellow members help each other live successful lives, offered to build him a 160 foot ramp in his back yard. He told them to go ahead, and after several months of intense labor, the ramp was completed; it was christened the Spierer Speedway.

"It begins at the top of my hill, and goes down the entire length to the river," said Spierer. "My hill is incredibly steep."

Spierer on how he and the other men constructed it: "We dug five ditches and in each one laid five telephone poles, all next to each other. We also used railroad ties. Then we covered them with gravel. The speedway is strong enough for me to drive my truck up and down it. I go down to the river a lot because I use my sweat lodge there for ritual purposes. I love that aspect of it. It's like a magical place for me...The MDI men also use it and they hold meetings there, too."

MDI member Barry Arndt, 65, of Edge Water, NJ conceived the idea of building the speedway because: "I wanted Howard to be able to go down to the river with his pride in tact. I noticed that it was getting harder and harder for Howard to walk down to the river independently, so I thought it would be great if we could find a way for him to still be able to do that."

Arndt elaborated that he and the men of MDI loved Spierer because of his tireless commitment to the organization. According to Arndt, Spierer helped establish MDI seven years ago, and in spite of his MS, has never wavered from helping other men.

"We (in MDI) have different economic backgrounds, different interests, but the one thing that we all (who built the speedway) have in common is that we love Howard," said Arndt. "Speaking personally, Howard's done so much for me; I learned to walk the fine line of showing tough love and refusing to give up on other men. He taught me to be more compassionate, and that's made me a better person."

Spierer's reaction to the speedway: "I appreciate what they did. Barry Arndt wanted to give me a gift, and because I love Arndt and the passion that he has, I wanted to give him a gift of being able to let him give me a

gift."

Arndt added: "The thing that tickled me about this project is that I was excited that I found a way to contribute to Howard, who in my opinion, not many people have been able to do. Maybe because he never let them, or maybe because he said he didn't need their help. I found something that would make a contribution in his life and that's what excited me. I relate to him because I help a lot of men, but I don't let them help me."

Building the speedway was anything but easy. "We were all unskilled," said Arndt. "This was a job for an engineer or architect, not for a bunch of unskilled men. But that didn't stop us. I'm used to taking on impossible projects. Without experience, I've built dams and houses."

When Spierer's wife, Dorry Bless saw the finished speedway she said, "they weren't able to give Howard full use of his limbs again, but they were able to build him this road. They put so many hours into building it."

Against his better judgment, Spierer also helped build it. "It was too much for me," said Spierer, "but I couldn't just sit by and watch them do all the work, because that's not who I am. I still can't let people just do things for me."

Spierer said that when he first developed MS, he was even more stubborn: "I still went white water rafting. It was really stupid because I had poor balance. I fell into the river. Until a few years ago, I tried to hide my MS at work. When people saw me limping, I'd tell them that I twisted my ankle. I only recently began carrying a cane. When I finally told my boss that I had MS, I couldn't believe his reaction: He asked me if it was contagious!" When Spierer first developed MS, he found it frustrating that people initially didn't know how to treat him. Worse, he couldn't stand it that people were suddenly extremely nice to him.

On a personal note, shortly after he developed MS, he told me that I did him a tremendous service. When I learned of his condition, I tried to bet him thirty dollars that I could now beat him in a one on one basketball game. I told him that before, he would have beaten me easily because of my vision problem, but now that he had trouble walking and keeping his balance, I stood a good chance of beating him. Spierer told me that he appreciated that I had no sympathy for him, and I responded that I would have appreciated it if he had accepted my bet because I was low on money and needed a quick thirty. Spierer said, "Block, thank you for still being a jerk."

Although Spierer can no longer play basketball, he coaches his daughter Orli's basketball team. "I still try to be active," Howard Spierer said, "because that's who I am."