

The unexpected activist: how one man stumbled into diabetes advocacy and came out a political insider; Diabetes Advocate

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Diabetes Forecast

Prior to 2002, Jim Radermacher was just a regular guy with diabetes. Then, after an incident at a concert last year convinced him that his rights had been violated, he became involved in diabetes advocacy. Last May, he attended the Association's Call to Congress: Conquer Diabetes in Washington, D. C. Soon, the regular guy with diabetes became a major player in his local congressional campaign and is now running for office himself. In his own words, here's how it happened.

I guess I owe it all to Tom Petty. That's who I was going to go see in concert the night that the security personnel at the concert venue told me I couldn't take my diabetes supplies to my seat with me. I've had diabetes for 35 years and my wife is a law student. I knew that what they were suggesting was not only wrong, but could also be detrimental to my health. At the urging of the American Diabetes Association, I fought back and lodged a complaint with the United States Department of Justice.

That was just the start of it. After I contacted the Association, they asked me if I wanted to become a diabetes advocate. I was on a roll and figured that I had a responsibility to fight back against companies and organizations that felt it was okay to discriminate against people with diabetes. Soon, I learned that we had a bigger fish to fry--our own government was letting us down by refusing to fund diabetes research and prevention programs at a level that they deserved.

So I signed up to attend the Association's Call to Congress: Conquer Diabetes in Washington, D.C. I spent three days talking to folks who are leaders in the fight against diabetes and also meeting with my U.S. representative and two senators. Since I'm from Illinois that meant that I met with the staff of Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-9) and Senators Richard Durbin (D)

and Peter Fitzgerald (R). The Association asked all of the participants at the Call to Congress to work in our communities to make diabetes an important issue during the congressional elections last summer and fall.

When I left Washington, D.C., I began to think about how I could get my elected officials to remember our cause. The dilemma I saw was that they heard from thousands of groups every year with worthy causes. What could make our objective more visible to them?

I had some experience in working political campaigns. There were some candidates in the upcoming election that I truly admired. When I visited Representative Jan Schakowsky's staff to discuss diabetes, I was elated to find how receptive they were to helping us. We talked about diabetes for over 40 minutes.

I had a thought. How could I further my standing with her as a resource on diabetes information? When I returned to Illinois I contacted her campaign office. They put me in contact with the local party in my community. The next thing I knew, I was the treasurer. I spent the fall working on several campaigns, walking the neighborhood with candidates, and attending fundraisers, debates, and other functions. All the time I subtly let those I was working with know I was a diabetes advocate. You can do that without being bothersome. It's amazing the information you can pass to people just by talking about your diabetes story. At the time of the election I was switching to an insulin pump. I shared the story with every candidate I worked with. I also wore my diabetes advocate pin as a reminder to those I worked with. It didn't matter what level that candidate was running for because you never know what office they will someday hold.

Building an alliance from the ground up became a valuable method to bring diabetes issues to the political arena. It doesn't matter what politics you believe in or practice. You can always find a candidate who shares your principles and is in a position to affect diabetes policy. Don't just preach to them--thousands do that. Make them your ally.

I am an accountant by trade. After the November election, a group from the local electorate asked me to use my financial background and run for city council. Included in that group are some of the people I helped last fall. Congresswoman Schakowsky has volunteered to walk the neighborhood with me in my campaign. There are many issues that are important to my town. But win or lose, while I campaign, as with the rest of my life, I will bring my diabetes story with me.

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