



## The Annual ACA Educational Conference: It's Good for the Soul

The theme of ACA's 11th Annual Educational Conference & Exposition in Kansas City, Missouri, in June was "Exploring New Frontiers." Seeing the unique interactions of individuals with limb loss and healthcare providers as they explored these frontiers, when hospitals and clinics were miles away, was absolutely wonderful.

A show of hands at the opening ceremony revealed that there were scores of attendees participating in their first ACA conference. Old friends greeted one another in the hall with hugs, handshakes and cries of, "I was hoping you'd be here!" People connected in so many different ways, from formal presentations and discussions, to friendly chats, to the extension of a hand at Friday night's barbecue dinner and an amiable, "Would you like to dance?" Watching all this unfold stirs and lifts something deep inside.

Certain things make memories of an event special and enduring. Actor Robert David Hall gave a moving and insightful keynote address about some of his experiences, triumphs and frustrations in television and radio. But what made his visit memorable for me was how he delayed his departure because, he told us, he was so captivated by all the ACA is and all that the ACA has to offer.

Thirty-two youths with limb loss took part in the "Youth Initiative" events included in this year's ACA conference, up from 24 the year before. For them, there were educational sessions pertaining to prosthetic devices, rehabilitation, training and other matters, as well as lots of social activities. A child's emotional responses to limb loss can depend a great deal on a strong support system. Unfortunately, too often young amputees do not have enough opportunities to interact with others their own age who also have experienced limb loss. Their sense of isolation can be deep and, sadly, sometimes overwhelming. The sounds of these kids playing together told the tale of how much

they were getting out of the conference. There's no better noise than a group of excited kids happily splashing about in a swimming pool, as many were at the conference hotel. Each child felt that his or her difference was the same as a friend's difference. Suddenly, they weren't different.

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Healthcare providers like me, who specialize in traditional treatments, took part in discussions on alternative and conjunctive therapies. Carol Sheredos of Towson, Maryland, talked about ways acupressure has helped her manage pain during her 32 years as a double transtibial amputee. Gwyneth Jones of Kansas City,

Missouri, told of how surviving a disease and, later, a building collapse motivated her to find relief with massage and exercise. A session on rollerblading overlapped one on balance, vision and the fear of falling. The providers interacted with each other but, unlike in other medical meetings, the questions and participation of amputees attending the same sessions greatly enhanced the discussions. I believe that everyone learned a tremendous amount.

Dr. Jeff Cain of Denver explained how the efforts he and others made to convince the Colorado Legislature to upgrade prosthetic coverage in

his state can also be applied elsewhere. Physicians were able to see and to discuss how important this meeting is to highlight the positives of good surgery, good rehabilitation, good prosthetics and good pain management. These things change people's lives.

Conference-goers filled the meeting spaces and waiting areas, relating stories of triumphs and setbacks. "I found a heel that I can wear with cowboy boots!" one from Texas said. Another person related how phantom pain is worse at night. Another touted the benefits of yoga. When conference attendees shared stories of "here is what helped me," one could also see in their eyes the unspoken messages: "I know. I understand."

This meeting provided doctors, rehabilitation specialists, nurses, prosthetists and others in healthcare with a wonderful



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opportunity to meet and know individuals with limb loss as people, not patients. We could chat over dinner, away from the hospital or clinic - a handshake and a dance instead of a medical history and a physical examination.

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Another enduring memory is of the closing dinner and the way the dance floor was packed with swaying couples. Beforehand, the band's leader had asked ACA Board Chairman Paul Ising, "Do you think anyone will dance?" And Paul responded, "You just wait and see!" The dance floor was jammed much of the evening and at one point the band singer led partiers in a conga line that snaked throughout the ballroom. Does Paul have a crystal ball, or what?

As the music slowed, one couple enjoyed their first real dance since she lost her foot. Several people quietly noticed, and one could tell the sparkle was in their eyes.

All of these little things say we need each other. Amputees, as well as physicians, therapists, nurses, prosthetists, and researchers, need to interact away from the clinical setting. At times, we all feel alone, vulnerable, and question what we do. In Kansas City, we were all united with others who had walked in our shoes, made difficult choices, persevered, and were very interested in helping make life better. Not only do we need each other; this conference served as a reminder of all the tremendous ways in which we help each other.

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