VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

We are thrilled to announce the launch of a new column in the ROCS newsletter: Voice of Experience will feature the stories and perspectives of people with lived rehabilitation experience, curated and edited by Spaulding Rehabilitation staff Dianne Vitkus. Dianne kicks off the column with a reflection on accessible design - at sea.

REHABILITATION OUTCOMES CENTER AT SPAULDING

We look forward to bringing
you these stories in the issues ahead.

-The ROCS Team







VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

REDISCOVERING THE WATER THROUGH THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

By Dianne Vitkus, PA-C

Before my injury, I loved being on the water. Growing up on one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York, boating was a central part of every summer. When I sustained my spinal cord injury, I assumed that chapter of my life was over. How was I going to get on a boat in a wheelchair? I couldn't imagine a way for boating to remain part of my future.

Then I discovered the Impossible Dream.

The Impossible Dream is a fully accessible catamaran built from the ground up with accessibility at its core. Through thoughtful features such as wide open decks, an accessible helm, and adaptive controls, wheelchair users can actively participate in operating the vessel. What makes the boat so remarkable is that it embodies the principles of universal design, creating environments that are usable by people of all abilities without the need for special accommodations. The mission of the Impossible Dream is to share the benefits of universal design and demonstrate what can be achieved when accessibility is incorporated from the very beginning rather than added as an afterthought.

Each year, the Impossible Dream travels to ports all along the East Coast, welcoming people with disabilities aboard for sailing experiences. For many participants, it is their first time back on the water since an injury or illness. The organization believes in the healing power of water and the transformative impact of adventure, connection, and possibility. Through these experiences, participants are reminded not only of what they can do, but of what is still possible.

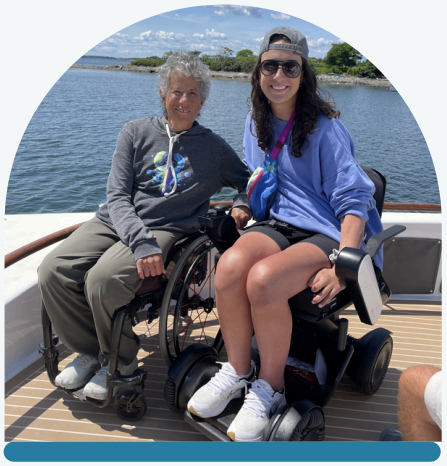
The first time I boarded the boat, I felt something I hadn't felt since before my injury: **freedom**. Instead of being a spectator watching from shore, I was able to be part of the experience. It was a powerful reminder that accessibility is about more than ramps and doorways. It reminded me that accessibility is not simply about getting through a door, it is about creating opportunities to fully engage in the activities that bring us joy.

This July, the Impossible Dream will be in Boston from July 9–18 and will participate in the Sail Boston Parade of Sail on July 11, joining vessels from around the world as they enter Boston Harbor.

If you see the boat in the harbor, you'll be witnessing much more than a sailing vessel, you'll be seeing a powerful example of what can happen when inclusion is built into a design from the very beginning.

The story of the boat and the people whose lives it has impacted is also featured in The Impossible Dream, a documentary that has been selected for the 2026 Flickers Rhode Island International Film Festival, taking place August 4–7 in Providence. I was honored to be interviewed for the film and to share not only how it allowed me to return to the water, an activity I once thought I had lost forever, it opened the door to new adventures and meaningful connections. Through the Impossible Dream, I discovered a community of people who share a passion for exploring, challenging assumptions, and embracing what's possible.

One of the lessons rehabilitation has taught me is that disability often isn't the barrier, design is. When we create spaces, programs, and experiences that work for a broad range of people, everyone benefits. The Impossible Dream demonstrates what is possible when universal design and inclusion guide the process from the start.



Dianne with Deborah Mellen, Founder and CEO of the Impossible Dream

For anyone facing a life-changing injury or illness, it can be easy to focus on what has been lost. The Impossible Dream reminds us to look for what is still possible. Sometimes the impossible isn't impossible at all, **it just requires a different way of getting there.**