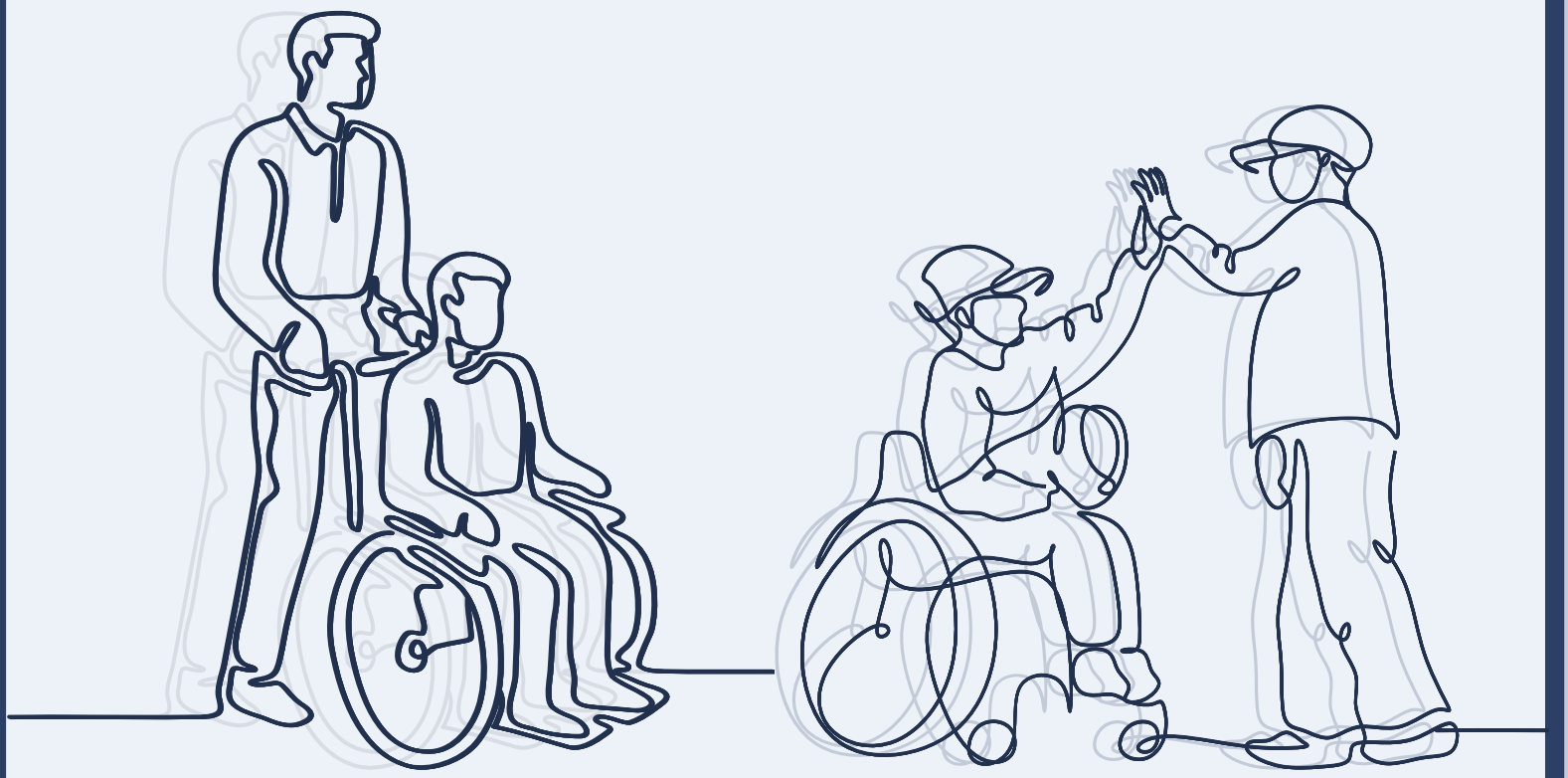
Turning Disability to Ability



By: Erin Gallup von Tersch
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Seyed "Amir" Torabzadeh's life is a testament to resilience and advocacy. Once a vibrant athlete passionate about gymnastics, basketball, soccer, and volleyball, Torabzadeh's life shifted dramatically in June 1979. At 19, he broke three vertebrae in his neck in a gymnastics accident that left him paralyzed from the chest down with limited use of his arms.

After two months of medical treatment in Iran, Torabzadeh's family sought advanced care for him at the Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey, California. His journey through rehabilitation was marked by a profound emotional struggle, a process he describes candidly, "Once something like this happens you go through stages. At the beginning, you're confused…then, you go through denial. After that, you go through anger and frustration. That is the most challenging 'make-it or break-it' stage." Despite the initial despair, Torabzadeh accepted his new reality and resolved to thrive. "I decided I want to live—and live a productive life," he said.

He pursued a degree in engineering at the University of Southern California (USC), where his older brother was attending to become an engineering college professor. "He was my 24-hour caregiver, working on his PhD, and working two jobs to support us," Torabzadeh said.

Torabzadeh said it was a very difficult time, but he improvised and asked for help. This was in the early 1980s before the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed in 1990. So, when he had a college laboratory class down 25 stairs – with no elevator – he relied on five USC football players to carry him and his 300-pound wheelchair up and down the stairs two times a week.

His experiences with campus inaccessibility fueled his advocacy. As the Office of Students with Disabilities Student Advisor, he spearheaded efforts to install wheelchair ramps, widen doorways, and create scholarships for students with disabilities. He also collaborated with an engineering professor to develop rehabilitation devices – one of which – Freedom Flow, now assists quadriplegics globally.

In 1988, as he was working on his master's degree in systems engineering, one of his physical therapists introduced him to the Department of Rehabilitation's Mobility Evaluation Program, which builds assistive technology into vehicles to enable people with limited mobility to drive.

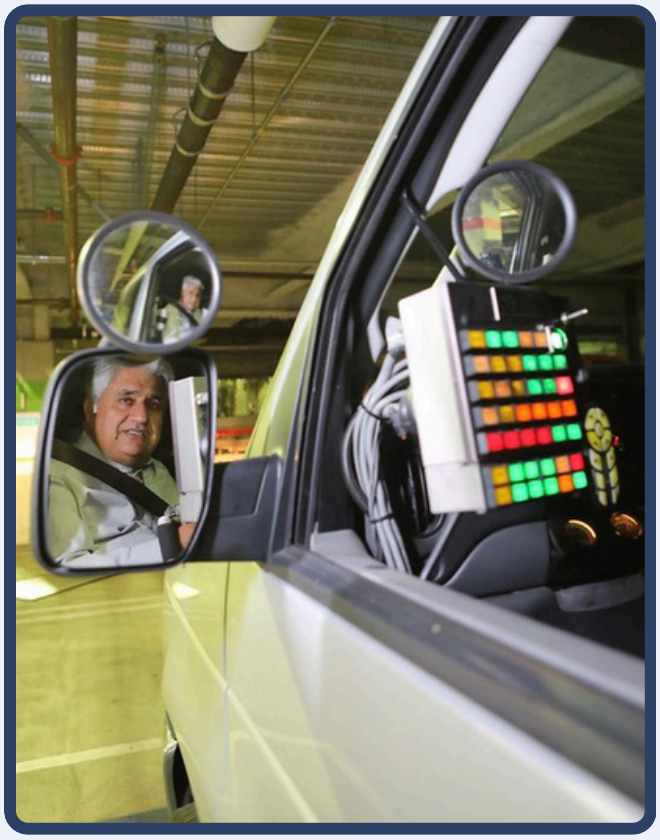
"That was a high point – a breakthrough – for me to be able to drive," Torabzadeh said. "I had job offers that I had to turn down when I was working on my master's degree because I didn't know how I'd get there. Now I had a way."



Torabzadeh uses a Ford E-150 van, equipped with a Ricon wheelchair lift to get in and out of his vehicle.

At that time, he connected with a hiring Caltrans Senior Engineer, who hired Torabzadeh as a Junior Engineer on the spot.

Torabzadeh immediately volunteered to join the Caltrans District 7 Disability Advisory Committee (DAC). Since then, he has been a pivotal leader of the DAC, working to remove physical and attitudinal barriers; advocating for new hires, promotions, and retaining people with disabilities; and raising awareness of the rights of people with disabilities to able-bodied individuals who don't have the perspective of someone with a disability.



The California Department of Rehabilitation's Mobility Evaluation Program evaluates individuals to determine which assistive technology will best enable them to drive. Caltrans Engineer Seyed Torabzadeh uses the Scott Driving System.

"Before 1990, and the Americans with Disability Act, there were a lot of accessibility issues," Torabzadeh recalled. "I was constantly trying to make improvements. I remember being in one meeting in particular, discussing all the [physical] barriers in the old District 7 building with the Headquarters and District 7 facilities office chiefs. I got so passionate because lots of things were not to standard. At the end of the meeting, the District 7 Facilities Office Chief said that because I came to the meeting and shared my perspective, the district secured $5 million to rehabilitate the building."

Torabzadeh said educating others about what it's like to live with a disability never stops. During National Disability Employment Awareness Month, he often borrows wheelchairs, blindfolds, and crutches so Caltrans executives can experience – for one hour – what it's like to navigate the Los Angeles District office restroom doors, cafeteria, water fountains, and more with a disability.



Torabzadeh travels down a recently built Caltrans District 7 ADA-compliant wheelchair ramp in downtown Los Angeles. Torabzadeh has been instrumental in making District 7 facilities more accessible for people with disabilities.

During the day, Torabzadeh works as a Caltrans Traffic Accident Surveillance and Analysis System (TASAS) Unit Coordinator, training Caltrans attorneys and engineers on the system and ensuring that it provides accurate highway and collision information to improve transportation system safety and efficiency.

But after work, he volunteers to assist Caltrans in becoming more accessible and also serves his city and county. Now he resides on the Los Angeles World Airport Disability Advisory and Accessibility Council, working to increase accessibility ahead of the 2028 Olympics and Para-Olympics.

His contributions to disability rights have been widely recognized. In 2018, CAREERS & the disABLED named him National Employee of the Year, and he was honored by the California Government Operation Agency and the Professional Engineers in California Government.



Torabzadeh uses the ADA door push button, and his Caltrans badge to enter his District 7 office building.

In 2019, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and County Commission on Disabilities awarded Torabzadeh the Nadia Powers Leadership Award for his exceptional advocacy. Recently, Torabzadeh initiated and helped make the Caltrans Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Disability Awareness Training mandatory for all employees.

Reflecting on his journey, Torabzadeh emphasizes the importance of compassion and understanding. "It is good to be aware that every person in their life, eventually may experience a disability," he said. He also highlights the cost-effectiveness of reasonable accommodations, recalling that his initial need was simply four wooden blocks to raise his desk.

Torabzadeh said he is proud to work for Caltrans. He said, "Truly I believe that Caltrans is one of the best transportation agencies in the world – not only in what we do for the motoring public but in how we treat and provide opportunities for our employees."

Torabzadeh's life and work stand as a testament to resiliency – of how a human can overcome a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, and use the experience to innovate, advocate, and improve life for millions of others.



Torabzadeh sits at the top of the newly installed wheelchair ramp that now connects the Caltrans District 7 Office Plaza with South Main Street in downtown Los Angeles. Torabzadeh toiled on the project for seven years to replace the old ramp with one that meets the Americans with Disabilities Act standards.



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