

Rusty's Journey: How Disability Inspired Advocacy in Bell County

Before the accident, Rusty and his family lived a life similar to that of many families in Bell County, Texas. As the oldest of five siblings, he was raised in a close-knit and supportive home and enjoyed an active childhood filled with promises. No one could have anticipated how abruptly life would change—or how those circumstances would eventually lead to advocacy that would benefit countless families for generations. Throughout this journey, his family remained steadfast in their faith and believed that he was sustained by God's grace.

On the evening of May 26, 1978, Rusty's life changed dramatically following a motorcycle accident that resulted in a severe disability. He sustained a closed head injury and was left paralyzed from the neck down. The physical consequences were immediate and profound, and the emotional toll on his family was equally significant. As they adjusted to this new reality, Rusty's mother quickly discovered that Bell County offered very limited resources for individuals with disabilities, particularly for school-aged children. Accessible transportation was scarce, specialized educational opportunities were difficult to obtain, and broader accessibility and community support systems were largely absent.

His recovery involved years of hospitalization at Scott & White Hospital and other care facilities. Because his injuries were so severe, he required multiple medical tubes and around-the-clock care. At that time, the only nursing home willing to admit him was located in Killeen and primarily served elderly residents. Later, his mother located Warm Springs Rehabilitation Hospital, where he was accepted for treatment. There, his condition began to improve, several tubes were removed, and he started physical therapy. Over time, he regained some movement in his upper body, head, and arms. While at Scott & White, Rusty was among the first participants in the Head Injury Support Group.

By 1979, Rusty had been discharged from the hospital. During this period, his mother met Ida Barbosa, an activity director at Wind Crest Nursing Home in Copperas Cove. She inquired whether the owner would consider opening a separate wing for younger patients. As a result, a youth wing was established, providing health services for children, support from the Copperas Cove school district, and access to physical therapy. A parent support group known as TRUST was also organized. This youth wing remained in operation for more than 30 years before it was eventually closed by new ownership.

In 1980, Rusty's family once again sought local resources for people with disabilities and was directed to the Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities. Through this connection, his mother learned that similar committees could be established in individual cities. She then spoke with Mayor John Sammons, who agreed to support the effort and helped establish the Temple Mayor's Committee for the Disabled.

In 1981, the Temple Mayor's Committee for Persons with Disabilities held its first banquet at the Gobbler Party House to recognize individuals who had demonstrated their abilities rather than being defined by their disabilities. Among those in attendance were State Representative Diane Delisi and Mayor Sammons.

In 1984, Rusty entered an independent living program at Herndon House in Austin, Texas, where he learned self-care skills and how to manage his own living arrangements.

In 1985, he moved into his own home in Temple, Texas, located next door to his family.

In 1990, Rusty returned to school, earned his high school diploma through a GED program, and later attended Temple College, despite significant physical limitations.

In 1994, Phil Washburn, then chairperson of the Temple Mayor's Committee for Persons with Disabilities, joined Rusty in meeting with Judge John Garth to request that the committee be expanded into the Bell County Committee for Persons with Disabilities. Judge Garth approved the request, making it only the second committee in the state to be organized at the county level.

Also in 1994, Rusty received the Bell County Meritorious Award from Judge Garth in recognition of his contributions. In accepting the honor, he gave credit to God and to his family. His enduring motto was, "Never Give Up."

Since 1980, the committee has held an annual recognition banquet and has met monthly with local organizations and agencies to promote awareness of available services and discuss the needs of individuals with disabilities. It has also sponsored activities and resource fairs to increase public awareness of services and support throughout the county.

In 2015, HOCTIL assumed leadership of the committee and its activities, a role it continues to hold today.

Rusty passed away on June 14, 2009, due to complications from pneumonia.

A Rusty Scholarship endowment was established at Temple College for a student with a disability.

Despite his physical limitations, Rusty made it his mission to engage with people in the community each day. He visited local schools, Temple College, Scott & White Hospital, the Temple Public Library, HOCTIL, churches, and other public places to encourage and inspire others, offer prayer, and share his message: "Never Give Up."