Peter Athanasopoulos with Martin Short (left) at a Second City event in 2017.

Inspiration from Peter

By **Peter Athanasopoulos**, *Manager, Government Relations and Public Policy*

I remember the day – August 12, 1995. I was only 17 years old and my entire life changed. On a family vacation, I dove off a cliff. I had done it before – many times – but this time the tide had receded.

As I lay in the hospital, I was feeling scared, useless and a burden to my family and society. ***Spinal Cord Injury Ontario's Peer Support Program reached out to me. Their assistance gave me hope and helped me find my way.*** I learned to be confident again, and to plan around my abilities and ambitions.

Inspired by the help the Peer Support Program gave to me, I began volunteering with them while I pursued my education. University became a career but success there wasn't enough. I was more fulfilled by my volunteer work than anything else, so when the opportunity to lead the Peer Support Program came up I took it. Back then the Peer Support Program only served Toronto, so we set a goal of a province-wide service and we succeeded. This essential program currently has 254 trained and active Peer Support Volunteers and eight Peer Support Coordinators providing critical support to people with spinal cord injuries across Ontario.

I was then tasked to develop and grow a spinal cord injury network. This was achieved and then formalized with the establishment of the Ontario Spinal Cord Injury Alliance. This collaborative network is committed to eliminating barriers to community integration and optimal health outcomes; I am honoured to be its Executive Director.

Since 2011, I have been responsible for Spinal Cord Injury Ontario's advocacy work. I am incredibly proud of what we do. We were able to get an important increase in the money available for the Direct Funding Program of Attendant Services across Ontario. This is real progress in getting ***vital support to those who need it***. Our Accessible Health Care Campaign is advancing province-wide access to family doctors who are equipped to serve people with spinal cord injuries in the best possible way. To increase accessibility on the roads, Spinal Cord Injury Ontario helped develop a new accessibility course at Centennial College to train drivers for services like Uber and Lyft; an important move forward to improving awareness and accessible transportation in the greater Toronto area and eventually the province.

Right now, we are working to identify and support local candidates who will champion our issues in the next government. Spinal Cord Injury Ontario is launching a campaign to connect with candidates and parties across Ontario in the lead up to the June 7th, election.

To ***support*** and ***amplify our community's voice*** we are launching an interactive web page – www.yourmoveontario.ca - that will allow people to advance our campaign goals:

- access to mobility devices;
- access to medical supplies;
- accessible health care for all;
- a stronger Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

We are training Peer Activists who share these goals. Our target is to have a Peer Activist in each of Ontario's 124 ridings. We are organizing, mobilizing and will make meaningful, impactful change. Join us.

Your life can change in an instant. When it happens it is hard to imagine a future. ***Spinal Cord Injury Ontario helped me see a future, just like they are helping others to do right now.***

My name is Peter Athanasopoulos. I have had quadriplegia for 22 years. And I'm proud to share my story. ●

AMPLIFY your voice

A donation of $123 provides one-on-one training of a Peer Activist.

Thank you! Your **support** moves us closer to our vision: People with a spinal cord injury living the life they choose in a fully inclusive Ontario.

Donate Online: sciontario.org/donate
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