

Learning to Make Lemonade

The Dallas Amputee Network



(L to R kneeling) Parachutist Dana Bowman, Ellen Fernandes and triathlete Ken O'Grady with the members of the Dallas Amputee Network

by Zahra Meghani

In July 2000, life handed Ellen Fernandes a basket of lemons. The 50-something Texan lost her right leg in a terrible motorcycle accident.

"I was riding with my husband and someone made an illegal left turn and hit us," she says. Thrown off the motorcycle, she found herself lying on the road, her right leg shattered and twisted. At the hospital, her leg was amputated below the knee.

Although Fernandes was invited to attend a local amputee support group while still in the hospital, she admits that she declined the offer. Relying on her family and friends for emotional support, two weeks after the amputation Fernandes was up and about using crutches or a wheelchair. A week later, she returned part time to her job as a market research professional.

Getting back to her old routines

helped Fernandes regain her equilibrium. "About a year ago, I felt good enough about myself to think about helping other amputees through their rough times," she says. Unfortunately, the local support group that had reached out to her earlier had dissolved by then.

Undaunted, the intrepid Texan decided that this was her chance to form the kind of amputee support group that she wanted. "I was determined to make lemonade from the lemons I had been handed," Fernandes says.

Her vision was of a support group that was fun, interesting, inspirational and helpful. "Support doesn't just mean having a shoulder to cry on," she stresses. "Support comes in all forms and shapes."

This vision became the philosophy of the Dallas Amputee Network (DAN), and based on her personal experience, Fernandes decided to hold group meetings in a nonclinical, social setting. "Usually, the only time an amputee sees another amputee is in the clinical setting and that is not the best place to connect with one another because you are usually in pain, anxious or afraid," she explains.

With a firm belief that meeting in a restaurant over a meal might put people at ease, Fernandes decided to hold the monthly group meetings at various Dallas restaurants. As the membership grew, the group decided that Juan's Mexican Cantina in Richardson would provide the perfect atmosphere for the meetings. "Juan's was accessible, reasonably priced, and they were willing to cater to the group's privacy needs," she notes.

Besides providing a private dining room, the restaurant also set up four tables at the entrance where members could sign in and look through literature, newsletters, media articles, and prosthetics materials Fernandes had provided for them. She also made sure that copies of ACA's *First Step* and *inMotion* were available for people to take home.

After dinner, the service staff leaves the room so that the meeting can begin. Attendance usually ranges from 25 to 40 people. The vast majority of attendees are people with limb loss; however, caregivers, family members and friends of members also attend.

What sets this support group apart from others is the fact that there is usually a healthcare professional (such as a physical therapist, nurse, physical trainer, etc.) in attendance. “I want anyone who has anything to do with the problems of amputees to feel free to be there,” Fernandes remarks.

It is part of the group’s mission to create a sense of community among its members. “We encourage members to hire amputees rather than someone from the Yellow Pages for any work they might need done,” Fernandes says.

Bob Sedor and Bob Vedder are among the DAN members supporting this initiative. Sedor, a 62-year-old hemipelvectomy amputee, hopes that fellow amputees will patronize his mobile lawn mower repair business, and Vedder, a 73-year-old above-knee amputee, anticipates calls this spring from DAN members for his landscaping services.

Later this year, Fernandes plans to create a directory listing services provided by DAN members. “I want everyone in the group to have a directory so that we can help each other,” she says.

Financial support is also a concern for the group and the reason DAN recently established itself as a nonprofit corporation. “This will allow us to attract sponsors who want to make tax-deductible contributions and enable us to accomplish more, while saving tax dollars on supplies and promotional items,” Fernandes points out.

The process of acquiring a nonprofit, tax-exempt status for the group, however, proved to be more difficult than anticipated, Fernandes recalls, and after finally completing the process she found out that the ACA provides a step-by-step guide on how support groups can establish themselves as nonprofit, tax-exempt entities. “It’s too bad that I didn’t know about the ACA guide before I went through all that,” she says.

It is Fernandes’ forward-looking, determined attitude that bodes well for the Dallas Amputee Network. “I think we are already doing a lot for amputees but I

want us to do more,” she says.

Reaching out to child amputees is part of DAN’s future agenda, and the group is currently forging an alliance with the children’s unit at the local Scottish Rite Hospital.

And as part of its future goal to establish strong ties with the local clinical community, DAN encourages its members to participate as models for student prosthetists at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. This goal has also motivated DAN to develop its peer visitation program. “We want local hospitals and rehab centers to know that we are happy to provide trained peer visitors for their patients who are about to undergo amputation or who have just lost a limb,” Fernandes says.

Because of the significant Latino population in Texas, DAN also plans to step up its outreach to minority amputees. “There are a lot of Hispanic amputees out there and they should be part of DAN too,” Fernandes says, adding that, to date, DAN has only one Hispanic member.

Not wanting to take all the credit for the group’s success, Fernandes stresses the important contributions of people like Sandy Seibert, Gina McWilliams, Paul McDonald and others. “So many people have been there to help me make decisions and support everything I’ve done,” she says. “The group would not be where it is today without their help. I relied on their opinions and gained momentum from their encouragement. DAN is truly a team effort.”

DAN invites suggestions from inMotion readers about ways to reach amputees in the Hispanic community. For more information about DAN, or to send suggestions, please e-mail Ellen Fernandes at jerryfernandes@msn.com or send her a letter at: Attention Editor, Amputee Coalition of America, 900 E. Hill Ave., Ste. 285, Knoxville, TN 37915-2568. ■