

PAUL STUART WICHANSKY

# *Perseverance and the power of a positive attitude personified*

After speaking to more than 300 school groups in the past 20 years about his experiences living with a disability, Paul Stuart Wichansky is anything but handicapped when he gets in front of an audience.

Through trial and error, the 29-year-old Rutgers University graduate student and part-time motivational speaker, who has cerebral palsy and an associated hearing impairment, has honed virtually every action and detail for maximum effect.

He has found, for example, that students pay closer attention to him when he wears brightly patterned dress shirts. He purposely avoids sitting down, preferring to circulate about the room so he can better engage students in the back rows and far corners. This also lets everyone see that he's not embarrassed by his stiff, deliberate walking style.

And when someone asks a question, Wichansky delivers his answer face to face, not from across the room or from behind a podium, "so it becomes a little more person-

al," he explains.

Wichansky, who has a master's degree in meteorology, reads audiences as well as he does weather maps. He's not preachy or morose. Mostly, he tells funny stories.

For example, one time he received a trophy for playing goalie on a soccer team for children with disabilities. The team was so dominating that the opposing players never got off a shot ("I could have taken a nap in front of the goal," he recalls).

Another is about how overjoyed his mother was the day he, as a young boy, wandered off from her and got lost in a toy store. That was a major milestone for Wichansky because for the first seven years of his life he couldn't walk.

And he makes his hearing aid sound so cool ("It's like a built-in stereo") that by the end of the program all the students wished they had one.

Wichansky, Freehold Township, started giving these talks when he was 10. His mother, Barbara, was a school social worker and suggested that he come in to talk to stu-

dents about disability issues.

Wichansky was a hit and continued to receive speaking invitations through high school and college. He recognized early on that by talking about his hobbies and interests, which include computers, Billy Joel music, autograph-collecting and sports cars, students quickly grasp the fact that his life is not much different from theirs.

Part of his purpose in giving these talks is to educate students about cerebral palsy.

It's not a disease, for one thing, he tells students, and it's not contagious. Those with cerebral palsy are born with a kind of brain damage that affects movement and muscle tone. Wichansky has a type known as ataxic cerebral palsy, characterized by jerky, unsteady movements.

Discussing the specifics of his condition leads naturally to the larger themes of perseverance and the power of a positive attitude.

"I was once asked what the most difficult thing about learning to walk was, and I said, "Learning to fall



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down," he says. "I didn't have the instinct to grab a table and stop my fall, so I had to learn to fall."

His main message is this: "You can have a disability, but it doesn't have to have you."

For several years now Paul Wichansky has given between 25 and 30 talks per year in conjunction with the Disability Awareness Through

Education (DATE) program.

"I still have a passion for doing it (in the schools), and it's always a new audience with new questions, but I'm interested in taking it to the next level," he says. He's always looking for a new challenge.

For more information about Wichansky's presentations, visit his Web site at [www.justthewayyouare.com](http://www.justthewayyouare.com).