

# Spinal Network: Building a Community of Peers

United Spinal Association and The Buoniconti Fund are changing lives for the better through the Spinal Network. Established in 2013, this large national network of peer support groups is dedicated to helping people with spinal cord injuries and diseases discover greater independence and quality of life. The Spinal Network strives to set higher and more consistent standards for SCI/D peer support across the country.

“Through the support of our founding sponsor Hollister, the Spinal Network has awarded 161 micro grants to 96 different peer support groups in 31 different states throughout the country. We are so proud of what the Spinal Network has become and I look forward to seeing this program grow and flourish for many years to come. To be able to connect individuals to each other and connect them to valuable resources and education is exactly what we hoped to do through this program” says Lindsey Elliott, who oversees the program as United Spinal’s director of member initiatives.

Through the Spinal Network, peer group leaders have access to valuable resources and training sessions provided through United Spinal’s extensive Resource Center so they can confidently address a wide-range of disability-related issues and provide the most appropriate resources and advice to their members.

The Spinal Network connects people — whether they are newly injured or diagnosed with SCI/D or have struggled for years to regain their independence — with a community of individuals who have overcome disability and want to help others do the same. The Spinal Network also connects peer support groups with each other to effectively tailor and optimize their programs, learning from their shared experiences.

United Spinal and The Buoniconti Fund, which worked together to develop the Spinal Network, share the belief that peer-to-peer support is one of the most effective and rewarding components to a person’s recovery from SCI/D.

Oftentimes, peer support provides the spark needed to change a person’s attitude toward living with a disability and show that there are opportunities around every corner to improve your quality of life.

“Hearing from others who have lived



**Spinal Network grants funded this social activity of the Bacharach Spinal Cord Injury Group in Southern New Jersey.**

with spinal cord injuries is helpful. A new spinal cord injury is a scary reality full of many daily challenges and difficult emotions. The support groups have provided me with the opportunity to meet others with SCI, and provided resources and friendships to help navigate this new life. I feel blessed,” says Christie Davis, peer group leader for the Hope Spinal Cord Injury Support Group in Springfield and central Illinois.

Davis, who was spinal cord injured as a passenger in a motor vehicle accident in July of 2014, had burst fractures in T5 and T12. She spent three weeks in the intensive care unit at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield. After three months in the hospital, Davis went home, uncertain of what the future would hold.

Davis adds, “Although it was difficult for me to try something new, I began going to the support group at Hope Clinic that met once a month. I was in awe at how the group embraced me. I now have a place to freely ask questions about medications, how to manage spasms, how to go about driving again, how a disability affects flying, and other things specific to spinal cord injuries.”

And that’s one of the key features that make the Spinal Network so successful — it shares essential tools and knowledge that empowers peer groups to offer greater support to individuals like Davis.

United Spinal Association and The Buoniconti Fund also offer groups within the Spinal Network grants to host a variety of events and presentations; host outings and fieldtrips; or improve their community outreach efforts.

One such grant assisted members of the Bacharach Spinal Cord Injury Group in Southern New Jersey to participate in an adapted gym program.

“We received expert advice on safe exercise routines for people with SCI/D and how to utilize appropriate equipment. The program also helped our members improve their health and well-being, lose weight and learn how to work out from home,” says Rebecca McGill, peer group leader for the Bacharach Spinal Cord Injury Group.

Other groups utilized the grant support to offer their members empowering, once in a lifetime experiences. The Midlands Breeze Group in South Carolina hosted a zip line trip to Camp Twin Lakes in Rutledge, Ga. For many of the attendees this was either the first time they had done a zip line or the first time after their injury.

“The trip was a very empowering experience for people. Our peer group focuses on what’s possible after injury and how to make it happen. To go down a zip line was a prime example of that. A wheelchair did not prevent anyone from experiencing the exhilarating feeling of flying through the air — just like anyone else,” explains Diane Epperly, peer group leader of the Midlands Breeze Group.

Through the Spinal Network grant, Individual Abilities in Motion in Northeast Pennsylvania introduced wheelchair dancing to its members. One member shared, “I have been to dances and weddings before as a wheelchair user and never knew how to join in. The dance team showed me a whole new area of possibilities when it comes to dancing with a partner. I suspect that it will be much easier for me to be something other than a wallflower at the next wedding I attend.”

Sometimes funds are needed just to help individuals navigate their daily lives and remain a part of their communities. For people living with SCI/D, mobility equipment is essential to providing the freedom and independence needed to reach goals, big and small — whether it’s attending job interviews, visiting friends, going grocery shopping or keeping their doctor appointments.

The Northwest Spinal Cord Injury

Photocourtesy of Becky McGill of the Bacharach Spinal Cord Injury Group