From: Scott Johnson
Sent: Friday, September 14, 2007
To: Barry Weinstein
Cc: Laine Weinstein

Rabbi Barry--

Thank you so much for getting in touch with me with regards to my thoughts about my recent trip to Aspen for the Wilderness Experience. I apologize for the lag in my reply as my life has been pretty crazy ever since I got back to San Antonio. It's funny how it seems like my days naturally get filled especially when my calendar shows otherwise.

Anyway, my Wilderness Experience has been a life-changing moment for me in many different ways. I will try my best to put into words the many changes that have taken place in my heart and in my mind..

Firstly, many of the most difficult battles I have faced as a wounded warrior are not the ones on the battlefield but rather they are the ones which take place in my mind. Prior to the attack on September 14th, I was very active in sports as I loved to play softball, soccer and volleyball. The injuries I sustained were primarily to my dominant leg (the right one), and the skin grafts and broken ankle have made every day a day filled with varying degrees of pain. Running and jumping are very challenging for me, and I face the very real possibility of not being able to play these sports again because they are just too painful for me. So, with these thoughts running through my mind, it is quite easy to get caught up in a negative cycle of thinking, and as a result of this type of thinking, depression often comes over me. I had no idea what to expect going into my week in Aspen, but I had a strong inkling that it would prove to be beneficial for me simply to get away from the hospital environment for a little while. It turned out to be the best thing for me in more ways than one.

I knew very little about the Wilderness Experience except that it involved two days of rock climbing and three days of whitewater rafting. I had never been rock climbing before so I was a little hesitant about that, and the last time I had been rafting was when I was 11, obviously before I sustained my injuries. So, I have to be honest and say that I was more than a little unsure about the whitewater as well. The most challenging thing I had done physically since my injuries was riding a bike for 39 miles. Granted, not an easy task, I can assure you, even with two fully healthy legs. With all this being said though, I have to mention that I have tried to find some way to challenge myself physically over the past several years, and the Wilderness Experience certainly seemed to present that for me.

So, I tackled the rock climbing on the first two day, and I was able to climb to the top on several occasions when we were climbing/practicing indoors and getting familiar with all there was to learn about rock climbing. Next, we ventured out into the beautiful mountains of Colorado to see how we could do in a real-life setting. It proved to be difficult for me because most of the climbs were right leg dominant, and that is my weakest leg because it endured the brunt of my most severe injuries. In spite of that, I pushed through the pain barriers I encountered all along the way and almost had to will myself up the rock face. I refused to give up, because I have taken up the mindset that when I do, the terrorists have won. It's amazing how motivating

that can be for me sometimes. Getting to the top was more than just a moral victory for me. It was a victory which proved to my mind that I could still push myself physically. Then, I had an opportunity to rappel which was again something I had never tried.

I can vividly remember the thoughts running through my mind when I was at the top the rock face I had already ascended. This time I was going to step off the edge of a perfectly good and solid rock ledge and place my trust in a small harness and rope, as well as trusting someone at the bottom I had only recently met. Talk about an exercise in trust! I know the first step over the edge was the worst because there is no more rock ledge--only air--and it was about 50 feet straight down. Of course, the person below did their job, and the harness and rope more than held me secure on the way down. Still, it was quite an adrenaline rush as I leaned back and "walked" down the sheer rock face. So much so that I went back up and did it again after I made it back down to the ground.

That brings us up to our first day on the river. The most challenging part was paddling into a 25 MPH headwind, trying not to allow the strong wind push our rubber kayak back upstream. Day two brought a few very mild rapids but nothing quite like what lay ahead for the final day. Laine and I were paired together on day two, and I think that allowed us to build a trust in one another. Plus, it also gave us a chance to get to know more about each other, which I have no doubt also helped build the trust between us. So, when it came time to choose the big rafts or one of the rubber duckies on the morning, we knew we were going to face some pretty rough water. I nearly chose one of the rafts that morning, but Martin, one of the guides from CDA, talked me into going down the whitewater in the ducky. When everyone paired up, it seemed to make the most sense that Laine & I would pair up once again. I think we needed each other's confidence because she later confessed that she was also considering choosing the rafts as well.

So, once out on the open water, we had to prove our ability to be able to get back into the kayak once we flipped over. Thankfully, our practices turned out to be the only times we flipped over in the water. Well, we did get pulled out of our kayak by one of the other participants after we had successfully navigated all of the rapids, but that doesn't count in my book. On the first set of rapids, we decided to let one of the more experienced members go first, and then we followed. I had chosen to be the person in the back and Laine was in the front. The first set of rapids was only a mild challenge, and yet after we went through, we turned around and saw two of the duckies flip over. The first thought that went through my mind when we were going through was to keep the kayak straight and we should be fine. So, once we made it through and had a chance to rest for a bit, I think we both felt our confidence grow not only in ourselves but also in each other.

We didn't have much time to "rest on our laurels" as we were heading into another set of rapids, and we were warned that this one was going to be a little more challenging. The next set of rapids we put into practice some very helpful advice we received from one of the river guides--we paddled more. As we were hit with the first wave, it pushed our kayak around and before we knew it, we were navigating through the rapids BACKWARDS. The current was so strong that it was just too difficult to keep the boat straight so I just went with it and as long as we didn't allow any of the waves to

swamp our boat from the side, we were good to go. I have to be honest and say that going backwards caught us both by surprise and we were very thankful that we didn't flip over.

With each set of rapids that passed, the guides gave us the option of climbing into one of the rafts and simply going along for the ride, but after our last wild ride, neither one of us had to give it a second thought. Bring on more whitewater!

I believe the third set was the one where the guides warned us of an area they called "Magnetic Rock", which was where the current would drag you up against a sheer rock face and ultimately flip your raft or whatever. We again watched Martin go before us into the rapids, and we were both shocked to witness firsthand his kayak flip only a few feet directly in front of us. I know that when I saw Martin go over, I felt a huge lump in my throat as I thought to myself that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to challenge the fury of the river after all. Besides, here was someone who had years of experience and he flipped over. So, how on earth could I ever expect not to do the same. Perhaps, it was a small blessing watching Martin's going overboard because it showed us precisely where NOT to go. We knew that we had to alter our approach slightly if we wanted to make it through unscathed and only slightly damp, not completely drenched like Martin. We made it through the portion where we had seen Martin go over, but we were steadily being pulled over to Magnetic Rock. I know we both realized it and we paddled with all our might and slowly pulled away until we broke free of the current.

It reminded me how much of a battle it can be to break free from thinking negatively. The battles in my mind can pull me steadily away from having a positive outlook on life and my future, and it's only going to take a steady, persistent action pulling me away from all that negativity. It also made me realize that pulling away is much easier when you have someone with you helping you. Laine & I worked together to break away from the current, and in the same way, it has been my loved ones (friends, family members, spouses, other wounded warriors) who have helped me on my road to recovery. It is never easy and when we give up, we can get "pulled under" if we are not careful.

The most challenging set of rapids was the last one, and it reminded me of how dangerous it can be to get complacent because as Laine and I went through, it appeared that we were already beyond the whitewater. However, we encountered a HUGE wall of water that came directly at us, and we both thought our "dry" runs had come to an end. Yet, we both kept paddling even though it seemed like we had gone under water, and when we popped back up without flipping, we were both truly amazed.

Again, drawing a parallel to recovery for wounded warriors, we must never give up, and this holds true even when it looks like there's no hope.

I am firmly convinced that if either one of us had given up when we encountered that awesomely powerful wall of water, we would have surely flipped. It was because neither one of us gave up paddling that we came out on top of the water and not in the water.

Truly the road to recovery for all of us wounded warriors is a long one. For some of us, it may be longer than others, sometimes years. It may very well prove to be shortened for me because of the attitude and perspective change which occurred in me as a result of my experiences with Challenge Aspen during the Wilderness Experience. I absolutely love the quote they have on the back of their shirts which says, "It is not the mountain that we conquer, but ourselves." I cannot begin to explain how much this spoke to my heart and challenged me. As a result of the week, I came away realizing that I need to focus more on my abilities and not my disabilities because I proved to myself that I can still challenge myself physically in spite of the injuries I sustained back in September. Plus, I made a few new friends along the way I likely never would have met if I had not been injured. Either way you look at it, I think they are both positive outlooks, don't you?

Sincerely,
Scott Johnson