

# Diversity Speaker Describes Overcoming Paralysis

*Audience volunteers help with fashion experiment.*

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The FDIC's National Disability Employment Awareness Month featured speaker told a daunting tale of a young woman suddenly stricken by a rare full-body paralysis, followed by a long, slow recovery that, 11 years later, has culminated in her status as a nationally known motivational speaker.

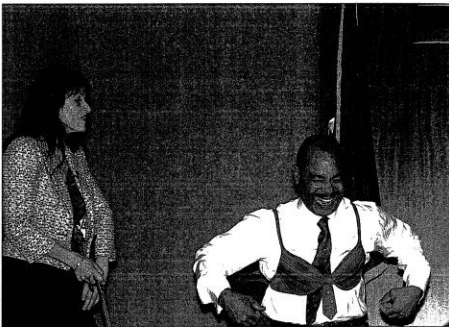
Author and lecturer Kate Adamson displayed her motivational prowess by persuading ODEO's Acting Deputy Director Les Crawford to come on stage and put on a bright red brassiere. But that's getting ahead of the story . . .

Adamson was 33, the healthy mother of two toddlers, when she was felled by a rare brainstem stroke that left her totally paralyzed from head-to-toe. "I couldn't move anything," she recalled. "I was incapable of speech or any facial expressions. It was like being trapped in a shell. The condition is called 'locked-in syndrome' and it was very frightening. It was like the 'persistent vegetative state' they talk about, except I could hear and understand everything that was going on around me."

Some did not hold out any hope for Adamson's recovery. "I heard some people say, 'She's gone—we should just let her go.' But one person kept faith in me—my husband. He continued to talk to me and try to communicate. One day he hit upon something: he asked me if I could blink and I blinked several times to show him I understood. He started jumping around the room. It was a very exciting moment. I, of course, remained motionless and expressionless, but I was pretty excited, too."

Adamson and her husband worked out a system of communication, using different blink sequences for the letters of the alphabet. She was able to communicate with her family and the medical staff. "They asked me what I wanted and I blinked out: 'h-o-m-e,'" she recalled. "That was my goal—to get out of the hospital, get home and get well. It took many months, but I made it."

After 70 days in the hospital, Adamson did go home. "My recovery, regaining my ability to move my limbs, to speak, to get around—has taken 11 years," she said. "And it's an on-



Kate Adamson (upper left and lower right) used volunteers from the audience, Legal's Larry Baker (lower left) and ODEO's Les Crawford (upper right), to demonstrate the challenges the disabled can face when doing simple, everyday things like getting dressed.

going process. I still have very little feeling on my left side and my left hand doesn't work very well. I need a cane to walk. But I've come a long way. And I've done that by overcoming the despair and depression something like this can bring on by focusing not on what I can't do, but what I can do. And, compared to where I was in 1995, I can do quite a bit."

Adamson demonstrated the power of emphasizing ability over disability with several audience-participation experiments. She passed out several bananas and invited audience members to peel them using only one hand. It took a while, but together the volunteers figured out how to hold the banana in one hand and peel it with their teeth.

The next demonstration was a bit more challenging. "Imagine getting dressed in the morning with one hand tied behind your back," she said. "I do it every day." Asking for a couple of male volunteers from the audience, Adamson explained why she wanted men for the next test. "Most men can remove a bra with one hand," she noted. "Today, I'd like to see them put on one, with only one hand." Two of the more courageous members of the audience, ODEO's Les Crawford and Legal Technician Larry Baker, volunteered. After the two struggled for a few moments, Adamson shared some pointers. "You have to fasten it first, then wriggle in," she said. With some more coaching and some heroic contortions, accompanied by wild cheers and cascades of laughter from the audience, Crawford was finally able to sport his bright red bra.

"It's good to have a laugh over doing something as simple as getting dressed," Adamson said. "But the lesson is that by overcoming disability, you increase your ability. By struggling with this simple task, these two guys have learned something here today, and they are better for it. That's something to remember. People who overcome adversity are valuable to any organization. If we can learn to overcome our reservations—even our prejudices—about people with disabilities, we can discover very productive employees, excellent citizens, even great leaders. We just have to learn to look past what they can't do, and come to appreciate what they can do." ■