Q. What got you interested in teaching windsurfing and other so-called adaptive sports to people with disabilities?

A. One of the most amazing things I ever did in my life was windsurf. When I was in high school - way back in ’74 - I remember thinking it was the most freeing experience because you were literally hanging on to the wind. I thought it was mystical. But sadly, it was fairly exclusive. I felt like: There’s got to be a way for everybody to do it.
Q. You were a Congregational minister for 19 years before starting the program. Is your work with people with disabilities informed by your religious convictions?

A. Although this isn’t a religious program, I think I took a couple of universal messages about being inclusive and nonjudgmental, which I think are good marks of any good living.

Q. At the root of your program is the idea that we coddle people with disabilities too much, that we and they should demand more of them physically?

A. The bar is held way too low for people living with disabilities. Oftentimes, people are made to feel “comfortable.” Especially after their teens, it’s hard to keep at it in a physical sense for parents and caregivers. We find in our work, 99 percent of the time, we surprise athletes and their families with what they can do.

Q. So, you’re saying that people with disabilities should be held to the same standards of fitness as the rest of us?

A. This population is poorly conditioned and in really poor health overall. You and I are told we’re supposed to be elevating our heart rate, and exercise five-to-six times a week for over half an hour. In this population, we’re lucky to do that once a month. We’re peddling hope, as it were. We’re trying to get individuals and families to go back and try risking hope of gaining more function. And that’s a lot.

Q. Your son has cerebral palsy and relies on a wheelchair. Is he part of the program, too?

A. He’s our chief test pilot. He volunteers for us. Probably more than anybody in our program, he trains a lot and he has accomplished a lot. He probably should be in a power chair most of the day, if we had gone by the traditional route. [Instead] he walks most everywhere.

Q. You are also a strong advocate for being more sensitive about the language we use when we talk about people with disabilities, for taking words of prejudice out of our language, the way we have when we discuss race.

A. I feel that I can’t be militant about it because I am fallible as well. I try to be educating in a humble sense. [But being disabled] is something people can’t change and maybe they wouldn’t want to change, any more than they would their skin color or their multicultural background.

Q. The words you’ve said you’d like to get rid of include “retard” “moron,” “crazy,” and “spaz.”

A. We’re suggesting that people can be a lot kinder in their language. I appreciate when people are trying to be sensitive in their language. The main thing is we hope that common discourse doesn’t use these terms anymore, and people start thinking about people they’re hurting and offending. Why do people need to use these terms?
Q. What do you say to people who argue that they’re just saying these things in jest?

A. You can be funny without using these words.

KAREN WEINTRAUB

Interview has been edited and condensed. Karen Weintraub can be reached at Karen@KarenWeintraub.com.

WHO

Ross Lilley

WHAT

Lilley, a former minister, is executive director and founder of AccesSportAmerica, an Acton-based nonprofit that has trained more than 1,500 people with disabilities in water sports, soccer, wall climbing, tennis, and cycling.