

Good morning, my name is Alex Watters and I am very happy to have this opportunity to be here speaking before all of you today.

If you had met me eight years ago you would've thought that I was one of the most active seniors in high school that you ever met. In fact, my mom often joked that she rarely if ever saw me. I was very active on both the debate team as well as captain of the golf team my junior and senior year. Growing up in the beautiful resort area of Okoboji, during the summer I held down two jobs and managed to have some fun wake boarding with my friends and spending time on the water.

In 2004 I was anxious to begin my adventure of going to College, I was on a golf scholarship to play at Morningside College where I had hoped to study business and eventually own my own golf course as a teaching pro. However, two weeks into my freshman year I returned home to Okoboji with a couple of friends that I had met at Morningside for a family reunion that they were attending. After we had spent time around the campfire, we decided that we wanted to go swimming one last time before the weather turned colder. While the girls were in changing, I went out onto the dock with the little brother. Once we had walked out on the dock approximately 150 paces, a gust of wind took the hat right off my head and blew it into the water. Thinking that I was next to a boat hoist and far from shore, I simply slipped off my T-shirt and dove in, hoping to retrieve it.

I would find out later that the water was only 18 inches deep. At the time I was approximately 6'1", 210 pounds and my neck simply snapped.

I was life flighted back to Sioux City where I would have surgery to stabilize my neck. I would later go to Craig Hospital in Denver for rehabilitation over the next six months, dealing with everything from pressure sores, more surgeries and learning to identify myself as a quadriplegic.

Although my stature has changed, my drive and passion to be involved and active has not. Upon returning home from rehab, I knew that I was not going to let this injury become what defined me. I knew that I wanted to go back to school, the sooner the better! To that end, after returning home in April 2005, by that May I was signed up for classes both for the summer and the fall.

In August I returned to Morningside College where I had hoped to continue studying business and possibly continue to pursue the dream of owning my own golf course. However, after a few courses I realized that my heart was no longer set on that dream. I knew that I needed to do more, something that I felt would impact society in some way.

In high school I had always loved being in debate and my senior year I had actually been selected as a page in the Iowa House of Representatives, so once I took a political science course in college I was hooked. Throughout college I was involved in many different activities and on many different boards, some of which may even

coincide with your college experience, Senator Harkin. I served as the student advocate of my college, president of the Morningside Democrats as well as vice president for two terms within my fraternity Delta Sigma Phi. In addition to the many events and activities I was a part of, I managed to graduate in four years summa cum laude with a major in political science and minoring in global history.

However, nearing graduation I still had no idea what I wanted to do for a career. In fact when individuals would ask me what I wanted to do after college, my mantra continually seemed to be "change the world". I simply hoped that by the time I graduated I would know how I was going to make that happen and exactly what those changes would encompass.

Having studied political science and global history over the last four years, to say that I was appalled by bloodshed, war and the lack of good communication would be an understatement. One day while reading my textbook I stumbled across a Masters program that intrigued me. I began looking for programs near me and two years later graduated with my masters in negotiation and dispute resolution from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

After receiving my masters I felt confident, but at a loss for what the next step would be. It wasn't until I reached out to a colleague from a previous internship during my undergraduate days that I learned of an internship with the American Association of People with Disabilities. I immediately applied and later found out that I had been selected for an internship with them in Washington DC for the summer of 2011. To say that summer was amazing would, again, be a huge understatement. The experiences I had and the people I met were life changing! Working with the US Department of Education, as well as the AAPD, I was able to meet a vast array of inspiring and motivating individuals.

Following the internship I struggled to find full-time employment. My dreams of staying in Washington DC quickly faded. I ended up moving home where I helped my former coach with our local debate team. I was also able to continue traveling around the state speaking to groups of young people.

After applying for what felt like countless job opportunities, I was contacted by a member of Organizing for America, the President's grass roots team here in Iowa. After having job opportunities that felt like the correct fit fall through, I was hesitant to put my faith in this opportunity. However, as luck would have it I landed the job and work there today. I cannot begin to tell you how inspired I am by our President, so fighting for his re-election is something that I am proud to do.

I couldn't have gotten where I am today without a lot of support from wonderful people. First and foremost my family; they have always been there to inspire me, pat me on the back and push me when I needed it. The incredible caregivers that have helped make my day to day life possible -- and also those advocates who set things in motion long before I became a member of the disability community. You, Senator

Harkin, for your hard work on the Americans With Disabilities Act that made these opportunities accessible to me. My vocational rehabilitation counselor for giving me resources when I needed them and assisting me with the college process. The many professors and advisers that have inspired me and encouraged me to reach for my dreams.

And while it is not my intention to run down the list of my accomplishments since my injury, I believe it should be seen as a testament to how a piece of legislation can truly enable individuals to spread their wings when given the same opportunities that others take for granted.

However, we can do better!!!

While I feel there have been many successes in the system along my journey, there have also been frustrations that must be addressed. One of the first great struggles that I had was my transition to graduate school.

You see, I live on the border of Iowa and wanted to attend an esteemed college in Omaha, Nebraska, you would have thought they were separate countries instead of bordering states.

In order for me to live in Omaha and receive services there, I would need to cancel all of the services I was receiving in Iowa and open an account in Nebraska. Once I did that, I was able to receive care in Nebraska, but I was not able to easily return home to visit my family since I was no longer eligible for care in Iowa. While I understand and respect that the state programs are their own, I feel we must begin functioning as the United States of America and allow individuals with disabilities to freely travel and receive education wherever they so desire without paying the price of being unable to return home from time to time.

Also while in graduate school, I realized just how inadequate public transportation can be. Throughout my practicum, I relied on my boss to come and pick me up for work daily so that I could complete my degree. I checked with Omaha's paratransit system and they explained to me that I was outside of the required area for them to provide transportation under the ADA. Although I recognize that Omaha is a growing and expansive city, there has to be better options for individuals with disabilities who want to be productive members of the workforce. If they have the passion and the ability to land a job, the very least we can do is make sure that they can get a ride there.

Another great challenge for disabled individuals is access to adequate care. One of the goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act is to ensure that individuals will not be institutionalized solely because they have a disability; this was one of the priorities at the start of the independent living movement. However, adequate care in more rural areas continues to be a problem to this day. It wasn't until I moved back to Okoboji following my internship last summer that I realized just how trying

it can be to find day to day care. While my family was able to fill in where the agency care was not, a single mom that I know in the area was forced not only to deal with her new injury as a quadriplegic, but also worry about trying to raise a child without reliable in home care.

Finally, we need to do better by our individuals with disabilities as far as jobs are concerned. Although I recognize that we have made good progress with reasonable accommodations and equal employment, meaningful employment continues to be scarce for many individuals with disabilities. A talent pool is sitting stagnant due to the overwhelming obstacles in their way.

Eight years ago I had hopes of being a professional golfer; however, since that time my plans and hopes for the future have continually changed. I have, as I find it to ever so important, continued pushing forward. I think it is difficult for anyone to try to shift their career focus, but for individuals with disabilities it can be very troubling. It was not as if I simply put away my golf clubs and learned a new trade. It was my attempt to find out what I could do in the workplace, combined with what I enjoy doing.

However, since I began my internships and more recently my job, I have noticed just how many challenges I have simply in performing my daily tasks. These are things an individual similar in age, without a disability, may never think of. Everyday tasks, such as picking up my papers from the printer, or filling out a form can be a great struggle for me. Also the lack of having adaptive technology within the workplace, or even doors that aren't wide enough for me to get through, can keep me from being successful in my workplace.

The good news is that I believe we are starting to see a shift in the consciousness of the public, as well as employers, surrounding those with disabilities. My current employer has made sure that there is an open line of communication for all of my accommodations and needs as an employee. For that I am grateful, and hopeful. Hopeful, that this job can simply act as a steppingstone, and perhaps someday I may even have the opportunity of representing the great people of Iowa.