

JR News

Summer 2016

WORK, HOME AND PLAY

10 YEARS, 33 YEARS, and 50 YEARS

10 Years

10 years ago on August 12th, 2016, I had the privilege of marrying my friend, partner, and lover Erika Richards. Our marriage was certainly predicted by none. It had been nearly 15 years since we all had graduated from our distinguished Camelot called Culver Military Academy ([CMA](#)) in the summer of 1984. I'll never forget the email I received from Erika in the summer of 99' which led to our renewed friendship and marriage in the summer of 06'.



John Richards and Erika walking down the aisle

She still is just as beautiful, warm, and generous today as she was on the day her father, John Richards, walked her down the aisle. After our three day event with friends from all over the country, to include 15 high-school classmates who wanted to witness this unbelievable moment. We spent our honeymoon at Rish Park; the place where she accepted my marriage proposal. Since this splendid day, we have shared some incredible adventures to include 10 days in Australia, numerous cruise trips, National Championships, Christmas in the Salt Lake airport (we got snowed in and stuck), Christmas party at the White House, and countless other memorable moments and trips throughout the U.S. Her encouragement and assistance in writing my first book (Now What?) and returning to Culver for our 30th high school reunion could not have been done without her. Her love and support has simply been priceless. In hopes of reciprocating some of that love, we

took a 10 day cruise to celebrate 10 years in January of 2016. The 6 islands were fabulous and the weather was perfect. Traveling is always much better when you enjoy the company of the one you're with. The last couple of years, because of my two surgeries, traveling and day-to-day life has been a challenge. But with her continued love and support, I see another 10 years in our future. It was my hope to love and be loved, because nobody should grow old by themselves. I thank God every day for the gift that keeps giving. With our official anniversary coming up, I haven't found something to outdo the 10 day cruise for August 12th, but I think I can find something appropriate that shines in the sun.



Captain's night JR and Erika

[Things of Interest](#)

There are lots of fun things of interest to share this go around. They include a new zip-line for persons with disabilities, a cool invention made by two students, and a powerful political ad from New Hampshire. Because this is an election year, we'll start with the [political ad](#). Trust me, this is a good ad and does not overdo the disability angle, but appropriately recognizes all of the families and advocates from the past to provide hope for the future. I am toying with the idea of writing an op-ed piece regarding my experience with Donald Trump...it was actually quite positive. I will always be grateful to my parents who never quit and expected me to attend college and to find my way in a world that was not inclusive of persons with disabilities. Much has changed since that time.

Over Labor Day weekend, we are heading to Orlando to enjoy the FSU/Mississippi football game. While we are down there, we will visit Gator Land. Not that I want to be the next victim to be consumed by an alligator, but to try the new disability friendly zip-line. With the help of the Florida Disabled Outdoors Association, and other advocates, Gator Land has produced the first ever [disability friendly zip-line](#). I figured before I get too old, I need to scratch one more item off the bucket list. Please keep your fingers crossed and look for pictures on Facebook and future newsletters.

Technology has always played an important role for persons with disabilities. In my case, technology allows me to drive, use voice activation on my computer, wireless cellphone, waterskiing, and so much more. This shout-out to technology is to solute the next generation who are solving problems for persons with disabilities. Two students at the University of Washington, Navid Azodi and Thomas Pryor, have created what they are

calling SignAloud system. Amazingly, these electronic gloves translate sign language into oral speech. These kids have hit a homerun and will truly empower thousands of individuals who are hard at hearing or deaf to more easily interact with those without hearing issues.

As we segway into another chapter of this newsletter, I wanted to leave you with a neat little sign/message that I now use in some of my public speaking. I think this statement is powerful!



Work

With my health improving, my work for the Agency of Persons with Disabilities and JR Consulting is picking back up. In truth, it's been a little tough. I've had doctor's appointments at least twice every week for the last five months. Also, I just got a new wheelchair to help mitigate pressure sores and assist with the aging process. It's called Quantam iLevel power chair. It comes with a number of bells and whistles, including seat elevation, for an eye-catching price of 20K. In addition, I had to modify the van to accommodate the new chair. It appears that I have adjusted to both the new chair and van modifications. As a result, I am humming on all four cylinders.

We had a successful legislative session with another 1.3 million dollars for Rish Park and increased our Rish Park Scholarship family program by one family. Perhaps the most exciting coming out of the legislature for persons with disabilities was HB 7003. This bill empowers persons with disabilities to more easily enter the state work force. In addition, this year's Family Café was very successful. The governor served as the keynote speaker and I had three different presentations; a scuba diving demo, Rish Park, and employment for persons with disabilities. We also had some success with making the James Patrick Memorial Program stronger. This is a tax delinquent recovery program that uses these resources to help offset the cost of personal care for persons with disabilities who are working. This is very important because Florida, unlike some other states, does not have an income tax or a program to transition individuals with disabilities from government dependency to self-sufficiency.

Here is a picture of the bill signing at the governor's office for SB 202.

I continue my advocacy within the hospitality industry. For instance, on April of 2016, I trained over 1,600 Hyatt employees on disability awareness and sensitivity issues. It was a very exhausting three days. Later this year, I'll travel back up to Memphis to work with the historic Peabody hotel. Once again, I served as Christopher Reeves foundation



grant reviewer. I had eighty different grants from all across the country to review. It's such a cool way to learn what's going on in the community, and how philanthropic money makes a difference. One of the grants I approved in 2014 was to produce a travel roadmap for persons with disabilities across America. Here is the [link](#) to part of their deliverables.

Also, a number of newspapers picked up my op-ed piece regarding HB 7003. The first paper to run this article was the [West Palm Beach paper](#). It's truly amazing how many folks reached out after the article. Thanks for all of the love and new friends. Wrapping up work, this year marked my 15th anniversary with the state of Florida. The governor called all of us in with 15 years or more of service with pictures and personal thank-you's. It was a nice touch. I do hope I can do another 15 years to get my full pension, but with Erika's help, we'll make it one day, one month, and one year at a time.

50 Years

I can still remember clearly as if it was yesterday when my father stated emphatically that he was a half century old. Well, it's my turn. On September 30th, I will hit that landmark age. Not yet old, but almost eligible for my AARP membership, and not old enough for retirement. Wow, where does the time go? Like many of you, I am already starting to think about Thanksgiving, Christmas, and what's going to happen in 2017.

33 of these 50 years has been spent in a wheelchair. In truth, I have no regrets. I have probably done more during these past 33 years than I could have imagined when I was 17. Some of the best years have been with Erika.

Looking back, this past year has been most challenging. I spent nearly 20 weeks on an IV (3 different protocols) as well as the entire anniversary trip. It made the cruise a little more confusing to integrate 3 IV treatments daily, on top of my normal routine. But, it was better to be on the boat seeing the world rather than stuck at home. I now have a new high tech wheelchair that includes vertical elevation and tilt in space. The vertical elevation is not new, but the tilt in space allows me to recline like in a lazy boy. The therapeutic value is to help with pressure relief and weight redistribution. The new chair was necessary to help fight off pressure sores and related edema problems interfering with good circulation.



JR tilting in wheelchair

Another sign of age is that my brother's children are no longer kids, but are now big kids at 16, 14, and 12. They have the Harding DNA and all stand extremely tall for their age. Not only that, but a number of my friends' kids are college bound. While we are not blessed with children, we do enjoy spoiling our nieces and nephews and Erika loves her tennis camps.

As mentioned in my previous newsletter, I am also challenged by the need for recruiting a new team JR. We are in the thick of advertising, recruiting, and training, but it's a slow-go. This year, I am just not getting a good response. The time for transition is just around the corner, and god willing I'll have a workable team. As I age, I am now seen as a mentor to the next generation, and was quoted in the national new mobility magazine regarding personal care assistants. Click [here](#) for a link to the article. It gets a little trickier to recruit good folks while constantly dealing with some disability related health issues. I honestly don't like feeling my own mortality, but I know I have many good years to go.

Fun

I always enjoy ending the newsletter on an upbeat note. Late last fall, we added two new members to our family: Lady Grey and Precious. They are great fun and exceptional hunters-they have caught or killed every gecko in the backyard, and from time-to-time they will drag in a bird. We look forward to the day they mature and settle down.



Lady Grey and Precious

While doing my Hyatt training, we attended the FSU Spring game in Orlando. Thanks to my good friend Chief Perry, (FSU Law Enforcement) we were able to secure field passes for the game. Being on the field is a whole new perspective. It's easy to see how these kids get addicted to having 80,000 screaming fans. The field was much bigger than my normal perspective from the stands. While on the field, Erika humored me and allowed me to go flirt with the cheerleaders.



Our first football game will be against the University of Mississippi in Orlando. Of course, we have our tickets, our game gear, and hotel rooms. The game is scheduled for September 5, 2016 and should be on prime time around 8:00 PM.

Erika will be joining her girlfriends in New York for the U.S Open just after the game. This is one of her annual excursions, something just for her. In the meantime, we are packing up and getting ready to go to Rish Park for the Fourth of July weekend. We look forward to sharing the nation's holiday with friends and family. We hope that you have a safe and wonderful holiday, and may all be well with you and your loved ones.

Until we talk again,
JR