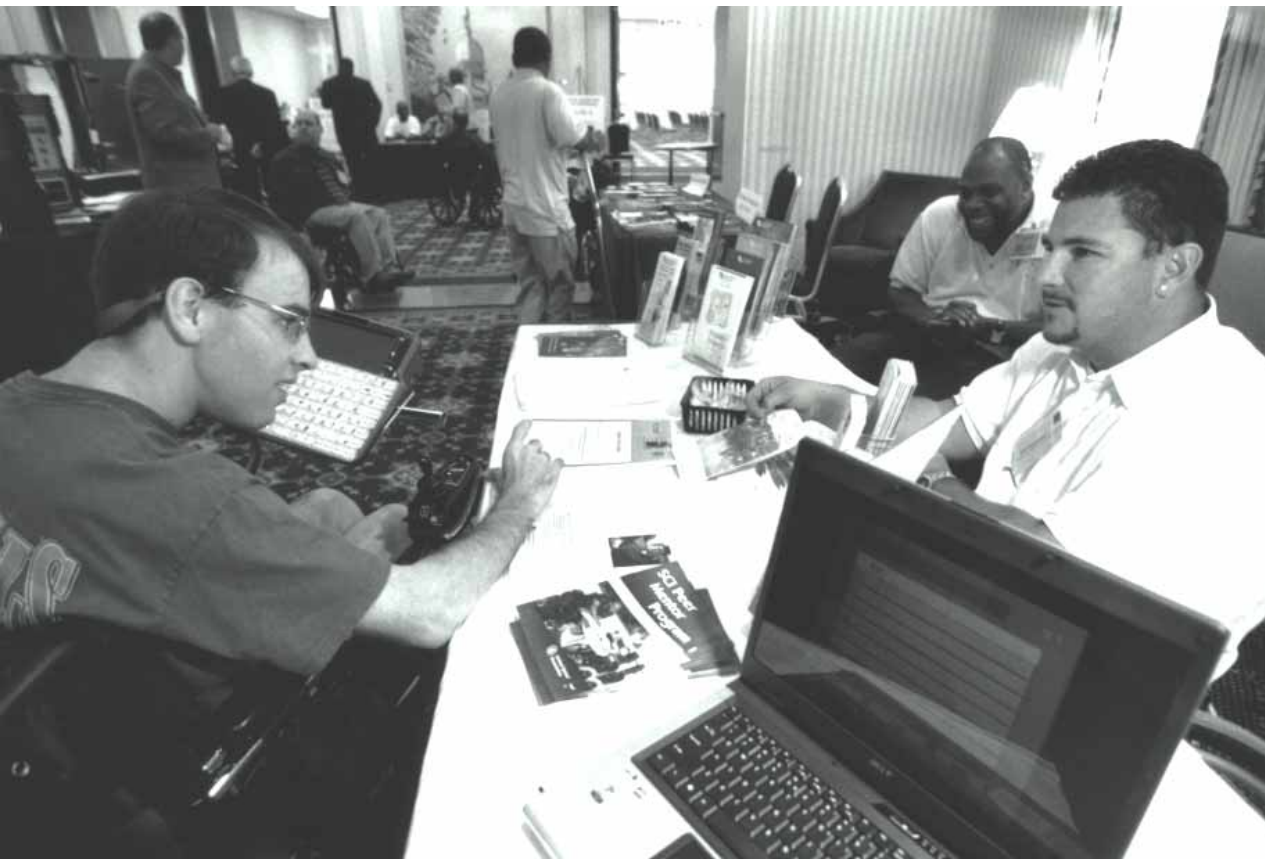




(L-R) Personal Assistants Michael Hartley and David Warren greet Tyrone Lockett

A Gathering of MEN

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT JOHNSTON



Bill Hannigan (R) of United Spina Association responds to a question from Christopher Kent



(L) David Tag, Vice Chair of the Men's health Task force, works the registration table. Plenary speaker Joe Cardone.

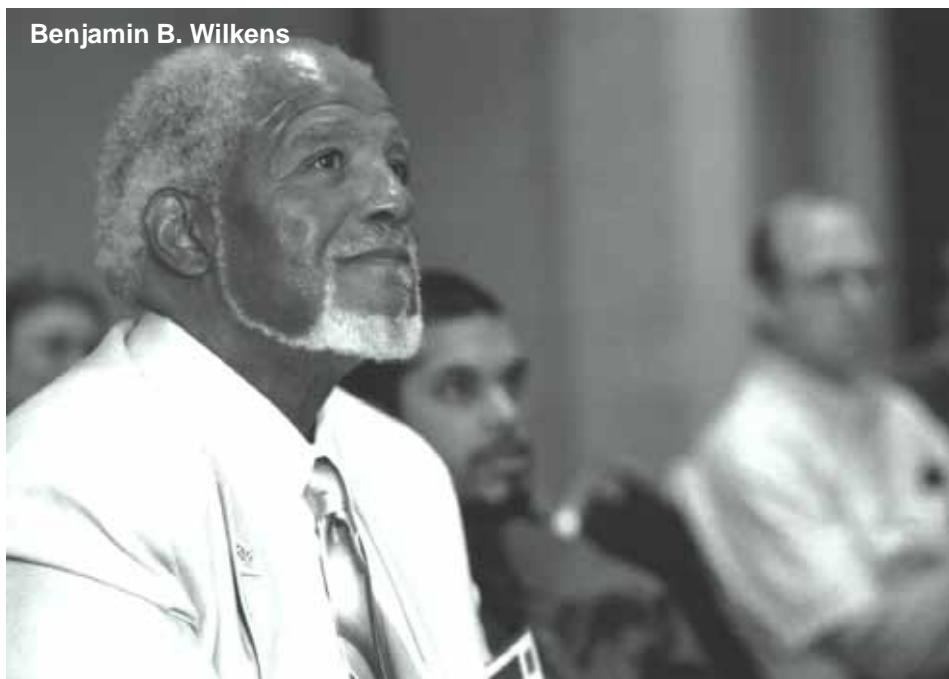
On a warm September Saturday, over 100 attendees and exhibitors participated in the state's first Men with Disabilities Health Conference. Sponsored by NJCDD's Men's Health Care Task Force, the all-day event featured a joke-peppered plenary on humor, mini-massages, a variety of educational workshops that explored health and wellness topics, and information stations staffed by over a dozen providers

and advocates.

According to Pat Krupka, Conference Coordinator, the selection of the workshop topics was guided by the results of a state-wide survey. Sex, stress, fitness, nutrition, and prostate health were the most prominent issues of concern and curiosity. "We thought there was an important role for humor, too," she added.

Manning the conference registration desk at the Trenton Marriot

was David Tag, vice chair of the task force. "The feedback from the attendees has been really positive," he said. He recounted how the need for this conference was established: "In 2003, following a health fair for women with disabilities, we posted a sign-up sheet at a Monday Morning retreat for anyone interested in men's health issues. It took awhile for us to organize... Ethan Ellis and Pat (Krupka) were good leaders. Our goal was to sponsor



an event that would put health issues on the map for guys with disabilities. Men rarely talk about their health. We wanted to change that."

Todd Emmons said that he especially liked the fitness workshop, as well as those about prostate and nutritional health. "I learned about the thyroid. I've had

problems with mine, so it was good to see pictures of it. I won't be able to remember everything, but I feel better because I know more. I also liked the fitness presenter, Peter Espanoza. He showed us some simple exercises that we can do by ourselves. People with wheelchairs can do them, too."

Later that day, when I bumped

practical 'reframing' tips to help us laugh more and not take life quite so seriously.

Judging from the waiting line, the mini-massages provided by Frank Mellana (Heaven on Earth Massage and Body Work) were a big hit.

"Wow, this really is heaven on earth!" said Roy Lippin, one of Mellana's first clients of the day.

I saw Lippin again at the workshop titled Relationships and Sexual Health, facilitated by Ralph Donofrio, Ed.D., and Stan Soden, a member of the NJCDD and chair of its Men's Health Care Task Force. This workshop drew the highest audience attendance – over 50 men and several women. "Everyone is interested in relationships," said Lippin. "They are a way of experiencing hope. But relationships can get complicated. It's important for us to talk about friendships, romance, and sex. Men with disabilities need to look at intimacy and dependency issues, too." According to Lippin, this is easier said than done: "Men aren't comfortable talking about this stuff, but there was a lot of trust in this room today. It brought us together. The men talked."

What did they talk about? The topics "ran the gamut from dating techniques to female anatomy, sex positions, and health issues," according to moderator Darryl Banks. "We also talked about personal choice."

After the workshop, facilitator Soden said that more forums like this are needed. "In our culture, sexuality is generally a taboo subject, but within the culture of people with disabilities, it hasn't reached the level of taboo because it tends not to be put into words. We need to get men with disabilities talking more about their sexuality as it relates to living a better life."



Frank Mellana of Heaven on Earth Massage & Body Work gives a massage to Roy Lippin. BELOW: Steve Janick and personal assistant Orrie Schulman.



into Emmons in the exhibit area, he described the conference's sense of community: "I saw a lot of guys that I haven't talked to in a long time. This has been good way to connect with old and new friends." I asked him if anything seems different when men are just with men. "We can be more honest about personal things," he replied. "We ask the private questions."

The plenary speaker, Joe Cardone, drew belly laughs and applause from the crowd. Woven into his sharp one-liners were anecdotes about the value of humor as a psychologically vital coping response. He also shared some