National Veterans Wheelchair Games

Athlete Profile (National)

Gary Orlando – Beyond the Competition

Gary Orlando eyes the 28th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Omaha, Nebraska, with as much excitement as he did at his first Games appearance nine years ago. He enjoys participating in the annual event (nine-ball being his favorite competition), and if preparation and opportunity meet he'll take home a medal or two.

Orlando's real involvement in the Games, however, is not measured by a stopwatch or the calculated movement of multi-colored spheres on a green plane. "We old-timers try to bring the young ones into the fold," he says, his true intention now revealed. He adds, "It is good to see them taking part because it's nothing a therapist can give them," referring to the interaction he and the other experienced competitors have with the new athletes. "Your whole life gets turned upside down when you are first injured. We make sure to let them know that life goes on."

His method is subtle, but optimistic. "When they're ready to do it, they will," he says of the other veterans he speaks with about entering the annual Wheelchair Games. He knows the event is good for individuals because the competition helps both physically and emotionally. "We all have the same thing in common, a special bond," he says with sincerity. "We don't care about how they were injured – whether it was in combat or not. We care about the person."

Orlando visits newly injured troops at both Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and Bethesda Naval Hospital. "I try and go four or five times a year," he said. "You get some mixed reactions from people. I tell them, 'Your life is going to be different, but you can do it.'"

For the past five years, Orlando has also spent time visiting area elementary and secondary schools with his local chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. "This is one way we can expose students at an early age so they can become familiar with our injuries and know what it means to be in a wheelchair," he says. "I get nice handmade thank-you cards that mean the world to me. I get them out when I'm feeling down and they really make my day better."

Orlando, 56, is a combat-wounded Army veteran of the Vietnam War, and lives in Erie, Pa. When he entered the military, he was training in electronics. After being sent to Vietnam, however, he became a helicopter door gunner for the infantry. While serving in that capacity, Orlando's chopper was shot down and his neck was broken. A quadriplegic, he receives continuing health care from the VA Medical Center in Erie.