

Skier Profile

Buddy Hayes – Being “Differently-Abled”

Buddy Hayes, a 47-year-old Army veteran from Chesapeake, Va. is not fond of the word *disabled*. “What positive word do you know in the English language that begins with ‘dis?’” she asks. “I consider myself differently-abled, not *disabled* – nobody is going to dis me!” Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) almost three years ago, Hayes has an infectious enthusiastic spirit and makes it her mission to help those less fortunate.

Coming from a military family, Hayes joined the Army with her twin sister in 1977 at age 18. She served from 1977-1979 as a heavy equipment operator in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. Graduating from a heavy equipment training class with 600 men, Hayes was the first woman to complete the program.

After the service, Hayes worked as a certified therapeutic recreation specialist for 15 years, a position, she says now, that prepared her for her own future. When the demands of her position became too great, she changed careers and began working as a pre-school special education teacher. But in 2002, she became ill and spent a long time in the hospital. A few months later, she was diagnosed with MS. According to Hayes, “I went from fully functioning to not functioning at all.”

Just one month after leaving the hospital, Hayes accepted a dare from her own recreation therapist to try a one-mile wheelchair race. “When I showed up for my first race, I thought I could never make it. I was the only wheelchair racer in the entire competition, but once I finished, I was hooked on the thrill of competition.”

Since then, Hayes has competed in multiple charitable competitions including the Rock N’ Roll half marathon, the Disney half and full marathons, and the Shamrock marathon, claiming first place in all and raising over \$15,000 for leukemia lymphoma. She also took part in the MS Challenge Walk, a 50-mile race where she raised \$2,000 for MS research. “I don’t race to win, I race to stay healthy,” she says. “I may not be able to come up with cures for these awful diseases, but I am able to wheel my wheelchair to do my part.”

Hayes has also entered the Miss Wheelchair Virginia pageant, with a platform of “sports and recreation for everyone.” She says, “I am really not the tiara type, but if it means getting the word out, then I’m all about it!” The winner of the competition will become the spokesperson for persons with disabilities for the state of Virginia.

In April, Hayes takes on a new challenge on the slopes of the Rocky Mountains learning to ski at the National Disable Veterans Winter Sports Clinic with more than 300 fellow veterans. “I’ve always been extremely competitive,” she says. “I’ve never skied before but I’m definitely up for a new challenge!”

Hayes looks forward to being around so many other veterans and learning a new sport. Besides enjoying the athletic and physical aspects of the Clinic, Hayes knows that events such as this help boost self-esteem. “I have a naturally upbeat and positive spirit, but not everyone is like me. Activities like the Clinic empower people. Taking a huge step like this helps people take much bigger steps in their lives outside athletics.”

Hayes hopes that the mountain will not only challenge her, but strengthen her spirit of adventure – if that is even possible!