

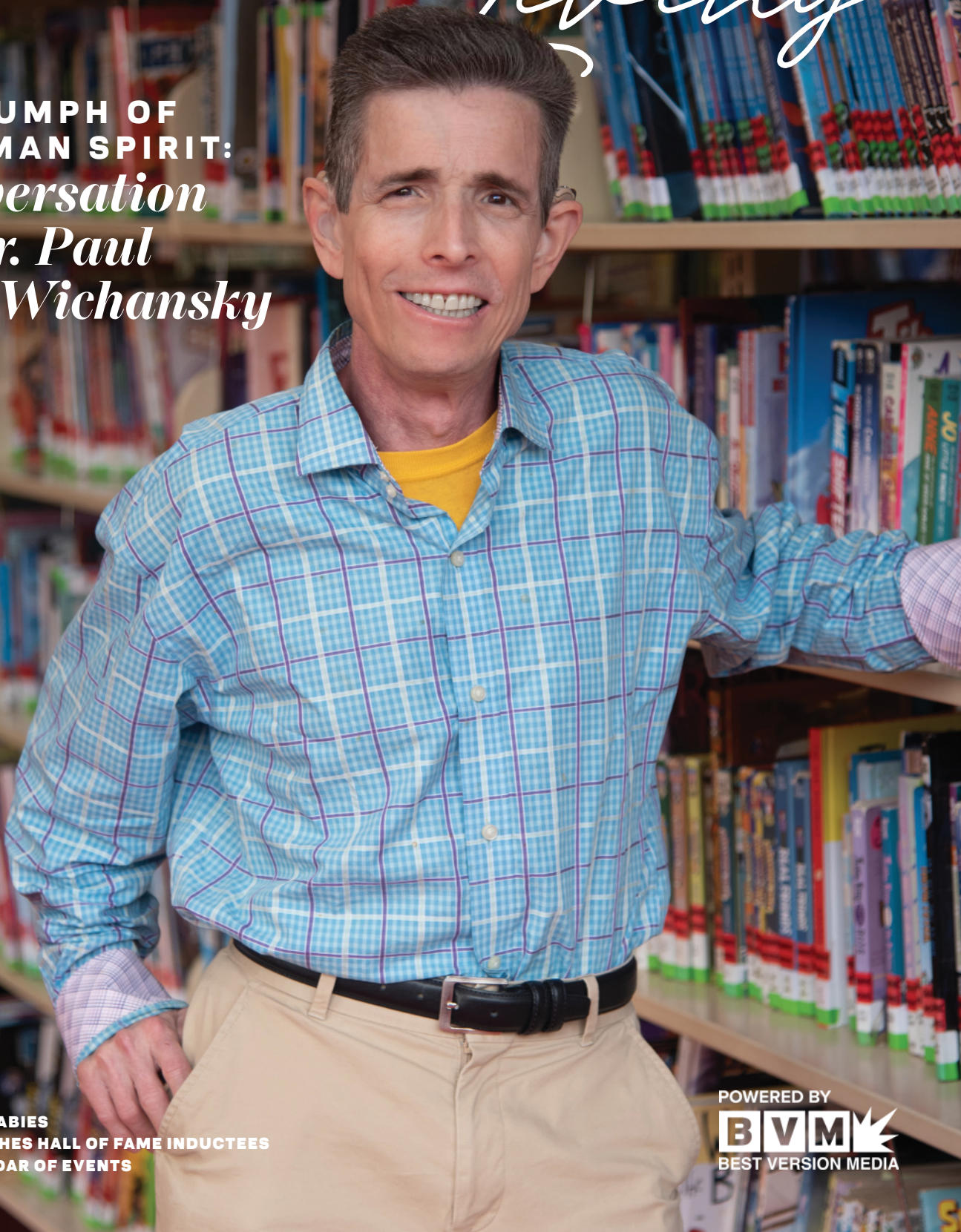
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**THE TRIUMPH OF
THE HUMAN SPIRIT:
*A Conversation
with Dr. Paul
Stuart Wichansky***



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THE TRIUMPH OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT: *A Conversation with Dr. Paul Stuart Wichansky*

Growing up in Freehold Township, Dr. Paul Stuart Wichansky was among the first students with a physical disability to be mainstreamed in the public school system. Born with cerebral palsy and hearing loss, Paul learned early on that his path would look different, yet his journey has become one of the most inspiring stories to emerge from our community.

A motivational speaker, author and scientist, Dr. Paul has shared his message of confidence and perseverance with more than one million people nationwide. With Anti-Bullying Week right around the corner (week of November 10th), his story feels like the perfect reminder of why empathy and kindness matter. This isn't just a profile; it's a conversation about resilience, standing up for yourself and others and caring for mental health along the way. In his Q&A, Paul shares moments that are deeply personal, but they also carry lessons for all of us. Small acts of understanding and courage can ripple out to make a bigger difference. His words shine a light on how we can approach life and each other with more compassion and why those choices matter now more than ever.

Q: You describe your story as the triumph of the human spirit. What does that phrase mean to you personally?

A: The triumph of the human spirit means striving to be the epic version of ourselves, personifying the tenacity that motivates us to rise above adversity.

Facing a challenge, whether an illness, injury, disability, or bullying, we find ourselves under dark storm clouds in which we have a choice.

Some emotionally surrender to their adversity, creating doubt and uncertainty about the future along with a negative attitude that pushes people away. Others choose to embrace adversity and use the challenge to inspire perseverance and resilience with their perennial "never think never" spirit.

I believe my soul chose to have cerebral palsy and hearing loss in this earthly body, not as weaknesses to be ashamed of, but as unique gifts to be embraced.

No one needs to have a victim mentality, frequently asking the question, "Why Me?" That question is negative and way too selfish! I choose to ask myself, "Why Not Me?" and see these challenges as special abilities that have inspired me to give others hope and, more importantly, self-love.

Q: How did your parents support you during a time when inclusion in schools was not the norm? What role did their belief play in helping you dream big?

A: I had the right set of parents with different approaches to raising their child with special needs. Mom taught me compassion, empathy, and always trying to help others feel their best, reinforcing a positive self-image. Dad taught me to be confident and motivated to reach goals, strict but not demanding. My sister Suzanne, a school counselor, inspires me with her family and encouragement.

Dad used a unique approach to boost my self-confidence. When I reached a goal or milestone, he offered his compliments, "Great

job, Paul! Now go on to your next goal!" His congratulations were followed by subtle encouragement, as if he wanted me to be unsatisfied with reaching that goal and harness the inner strength to "raise the bar," achieving beyond what he thought I could do.

While Dad rarely shares with me how proud he is, I often hear remarks from family and friends that he freely shared his pride with them!

My parents also practiced patience rather than choosing to unfairly compare my achievements with those of my peers. For example, hearing an unexpected noise would cause my muscles to instinctively tighten, a reflex that caused my body to jump. Dad suggested waiting an extra year to earn my driver's permit so that I could have improved control of these reflexes. Though I was proud to earn a driver's license one year later at age 18, it would be three more years before Mom and Dad were confident in my driving skills that they allowed me, for the first time, to drive 15 miles to the Jersey Shore alone.

Their patience eventually became infused in my personality.

Q: You have shared your experience of being bullied and choosing to forgive. What helped you make that decision and how has it shaped your approach to life?

A: When I learned to forgive a bully who hurt me in the past, a sense of emotional freedom emerged. Why would someone else take my power, make me angry or overcome with uncertainty, at a moment when I should feel empowered?

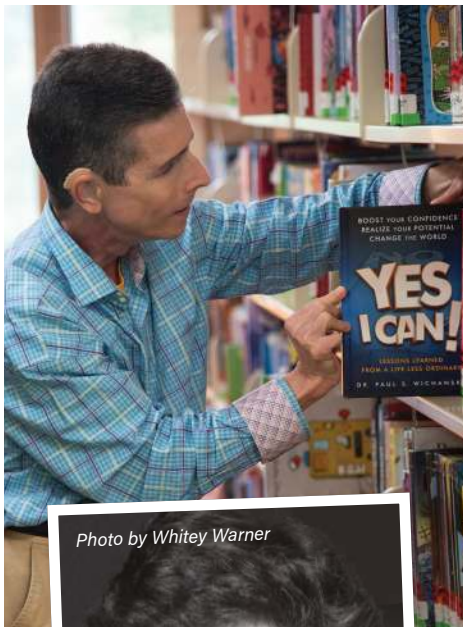


Photo by Whitey Warner



Forgiveness is itself a sign of strength, never a weakness. It is also an act of love that can replace feelings of hostility, greed, or jealousy. We also need to forgive the younger version of ourselves for having anger and rage that once poisoned our soul, with the expectation that the other person would be hurt. This can sadly destroy our optimism and, with it, our dreams.

I encourage everyone, including kids and teens, to let go of the anger and forgive those bullies who hurt you, perhaps with a degrading social media post or negative words. You'll feel much better because love is replacing anger and denial. I did exactly the same, which is why the former bullies are now my friends. They learned empathy. We learn to feel confident and loved too.

Withholding love from others (and sadly from ourselves) represents the pain and anger we carry. Love everyone; even those whom you feel do not even deserve our respect. Just love those kinds of people "from a distance."

Q: Your programs focus on confidence, resilience, and mindset. What message do you believe kids and parents most need to hear today?

A: Optimism and confidence are the cornerstones of self-empowerment.

Keep social media on the desktop computer exclusively at home. When walking out the door each morning, and I speak for parents too, leave all social media behind for the day and focus on living in the moment. It's depressing to be dining at a restaurant and observe a family at the next table, each glued to their screens rather than the parents sharing family time with their kids.

Maximize the time you spend with others while honoring our elders.

For instance, following her retirement, Big Gramma lived alone in Covered Bridge. I took frequent breaks from my graduate studies and drove to her apartment several times a week to take her for lunch or dinner. While my parents

acknowledged the benefit of those meals, they argued with me because I was spoiling her at the expense of my graduate studies. My priorities were straight and my heart was in the right place. I knew someday these meals would end, but I did get to know Big Gramma better than did any of my family members. Even if we had the same conversation a few times per week, I smiled at the attention we showered on each other.

We don't ever want to miss such family moments when our faces are otherwise buried in a cell phone or playing video games. Though Big Gramma passed many years ago, her love continues to speak through me. This is how I describe the importance of role models to children and teens.

The power of love can be harnessed in resilience. Love is omnipresent; with resilience comes our choice to positively respond to negative moments.

The times when you are happy and content, and everything seems to be going your way, will be mixed in with other times you are angry or depressed. When your sun has risen above the horizon, your future looks so bright and promising as you bask in the sunshine. There will be moments when your sun abruptly sets, ushering in a period of nightfall. The darkness may be accompanied by frustration, depression, or despair. But you cannot lose sight of the future: keep your gaze focused towards the east. Your sun will rise again, so good times are ahead with a strong support group that helps you stay optimistic.

This is life itself; it's our choice whether to be in the sunshine or darkness.

Q: You mentioned being part of the Freehold Township school system. Are there any teachers, classmates, or early memories that played a meaningful role in your journey?

A: As the first student with a physical disability to attend Laura Donovan School in 1976, the

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district created innovative peer-to-peer support. My friend, Nicole Scarfone, was my “unofficial” assistant. Even at our young ages, Nicole took her assistant role so seriously that it later inspired her to pursue a career in psychotherapy where she could also help others.

Learning to walk without falling was one of my proudest achievements at Laura Donovan School. My teachers recall a bright special-needs student who never saw himself as being any different from his classmates.

At Freehold Township High School, Brian Freudenberger was the all-star athlete who was adored by his peers. With his friendly personality and empathetic heart, he frequently stopped to talk to me as if he wanted to, whether it was as simple as asking how my day was going or complimenting my smile or outfit.

Brian was another of my friends who gave me confidence. One day, when a student accidentally bumped into me in the hallway and I fell, Brian immediately came to my aid, scolding the student and helping me stand up. He reassured me, “Keep smiling, Paul. Your smile sure is contagious!”

Every Freehold student today should have a friend like Brian in their lives.

Q: When you speak to a group of students, parents, or educators, what do you hope they take away from the experience?

A: As a motivational speaker, my programs help inspire confidence, personal growth, and opportunity, motivating audiences to harness untapped potential. The objective is to show how a positive mindset can, in the face of adversity, help reduce self-doubt and build self-confidence.

We can collectively transform fear and ignorance into kindness, respect, and perhaps admiration for those who strive to rise above adversity.

The confidence that emerges is a latent superpower, inspiring us to leap over some of the most overwhelming hurdles that life throws our way. Recognizing others for their abilities, not their disabilities, is indeed the greatest school of humanity.

Strive to do the best with the day we have. That’s how we find happiness and change the world.

I cannot do this alone. I invite Freehold readers, young and old, to join me on this journey! And be proud of the town in which we live, work, and enjoy.



My website conveys optimism too: www.JustTheWayYouAre.com

Q: You have reached more than one million people over the years. Are there any moments that stand out? Has a student ever said something that stayed with you?

A: Since I started my speaking career at age 10, I have shared my story with over one million youth, parents, and educators nationwide. For 18 years, our New Jersey State Police has invited me to speak on leadership and resilience during Trooper Youth Week.

Following my assemblies, grade-school children will often be beaming, but it’s the teens and educators that are more emotionally affected. Many gather in a line waiting to personally thank me, with some who request hugs end up bawling when they do. I have given them the gifts of optimism and confidence.

One 10th-grader wrote a thank-you note closing with these words:

“From the bottom of my heart, Dr. Paul, thank you. You gave me courage today, you gave me hope, and you made me smile again. Whenever I start to feel down about the world, it is incredibly comforting to know that people like you exist... Even if we can’t all be Paul, we can still be someone. That is more than enough. In truth, that is everything.”

Those words brought me to tears.

Q: What does a good day look like for you now? How do you stay grounded and motivated when you are not on stage?

A: My day usually begins at 4:30 a.m. to exercise at Retro Fitness Freehold for an early morning workout. Then I go to join the early morning crowd at Freehold Panera, often arriving at 7 a.m. for a healthy breakfast!

Recognizing that I used to be in a wheelchair for four years in my childhood and can now walk pretty well, I enjoy keeping my car spotless. Readers have likely seen me driving around the state in a unique car, an older white Honda Accord rebadged with BMW emblems. Because many drivers frown when they drive, I customized my car to get those drivers smiling! Laughter helps dismiss any seeds of doubt when faced with daily adversity.

Many of my friends asked me to chauffeur them in this Honda “BMW” Accord on their wedding day. The photos taken during a life milestone also symbolize our enduring friendship with an



unusual street machine that fiercely represents my independence.

Q: Can you tell us a little about your memoir, Yes I Can! What inspired it and what would you hope a reader walks away with?

A: I wrote this memoir as a resource to help teens, parents, and other special-needs kids overcome self-doubt when faced with bullying or prejudice. Each chapter is filled with stories that inspire readers to develop a positive mindset and celebrate their uniqueness, highlighting principles of self-empowerment like self-love, positive attitude, perseverance, resilience, and empathy.

The inspiration was the unexpected gift we discovered after Mom’s passing: a handwritten journal describing her memories and frustrations going back to the time of my birth. Finding such a wonderful memento full of memories I thought were lost to the sands of time was like opening a treasure chest!

After we laid her to eternal rest, I felt Mom guiding my thoughts as I began weaving her loving recollections into the narrative. Dad offered constructive critiques that have added brilliant clarity to these experiences. The memoir ends with a love letter to Mom.

For additional details, visit www.YesICanBook.com

Q: Is there anything else you would like our Freehold readers to know about you or your journey?

A: I have been immeasurably blessed knowing and interacting with our Freehold community. Growing up in an era before “inclusion” became the guiding hallmark of education, I was fortunate to be mainstreamed in my education and devoted nearly 45 years of my life to help others overcome adversity.

I hope that this article perhaps inspires you to rise above challenges and share gifts of love, empathy, laughter, and understanding that make all our Freehold lives worthwhile. Because at the end of my earthly life, perhaps far into the future, I envision my humble soul before the spiritual council of galactic elders, sharing, “I did the best job I could with the earthly body, mind, and spirit that I had. Thank you for letting me live the life of Dr. Paul. I loved every minute!”

The daily challenges I continue to face have given me a valuable perspective which I am using to inspire our country’s future. Each of us is loved more than we can possibly know! Shining your light is spreading your love.