

Dr. Dick Traum '58: Helping wounded veterans triumph



Dr. Dick Traum '58 (center) with Achilles International athletes

Eight Golden Glove winners were at Yankee Stadium on June 24, 2011, when the NY Yankees played the Colorado Rockies. But the catch that won "Play of the Day" sports news status was made by a fan, who nabbed a foul ball inside his cap. The fan was Sgt. Michael Kacer. The retired U.S. Army staff sergeant used his hat to assist his right-armed catch, because he'd lost his left arm in a rocket attack in Afghanistan.

The 46,000 fans at the stadium who gave Sgt. Kacer a standing ovation and the millions who viewed the catch on TV saw him dressed in an Achilles International Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans T-shirt, surrounded by 20 other Achilles Freedom Team Vets. The Team members were in New York to take part in the ninth-annual Achilles Hope and Possibility Race, a five-mile event in which hundreds of disabled athletes mainstream among 5,000 runners.

The race is a signature event for Achilles International, and Achilles is the signature organization providing athletic opportunities to people with disabilities around the world. Achilles International was founded by Dr. Richard Traum '58, whose organization demonstrates how one Horace Mann alumnus translated his school's mission of educating students to lead "great and giving lives."

"A VICTORY FOR HUMANITY"

Achilles International engages over 10,000 people in 70 countries in athletic training and events. The organization and Traum, its founder and president, have been widely honored. On August 3, 2011 he was profiled online as "HuffPost Greatest Person of the Day."

To understand the history of Achilles International, one must go back to the 1950s, when Dick Traum was a student at Horace Mann. HM alumni from generations past often recall a quote on the school's library wall attributed to 19th century American education reformer Horace Mann: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." Traum was among the students who read the quote nearly a century later. The words came back to him at a critical point in his life.

Dick Traum was an athlete at Horace Mann and at NYU, who focused on wrestling and track and field. In 1965, at age 24, a car collided into him as he stood at a gas station. His right leg was amputated above the knee. Lying in the hospital, in a life-threatening situation, Traum recalled the quote and thought he had yet to leave a mark on society. With this idea constantly in mind, Traum eventually put those words to work—for himself, and for the millions of people with disabilities he has inspired.

After his accident Traum went on to complete a Ph.D. at NYU's Stern School of Management, and founded a computer applications company. About a decade later, he was shaken again by a colleague's fatal heart attack—and decided to act.

Traum joined a local YMCA and attempted running. His runs evolved from struggling minutes to conquered miles. Within 18 months Dr. Traum became the first-ever amputee to complete a marathon. An article about him in *Runners World* inspired other disabled athletes, and interest grew. In 1983 Traum founded the Achilles Track Club. That year, six members competed in the NY Marathon. A year later an Achilles chapter opened in Vermont, and, in 1985, with a New Zealand chapter, Achilles International was born.

Dr. Traum attributes his success on behalf of Achilles International, in part, to his educational experience at Horace Mann, where he learned "about differences and about leadership," he recalled.

"Horace Mann had a fantastic selection of teachers. They gave the students an opportunity to learn beyond the course work. There were conservatives, liberals, obsessive compulsives, authoritarians... Teachers bonded with and motivated the students. The faculty was family. Some of the great value of Horace Mann was found outside the classroom. Almost every student had an opportunity to lead. They could become the captain of a team or the head of a club, or a part of student government, the newspaper or the theater. I have found no place in my fifty years following HM where people had so much room to grow."

GROWING ACHILLES FOR VETERANS, YOUTH AND RESEARCH

Dr. Traum has applied his HM experience to growing Achilles International. In 1995 he added Achilles Kids to the organization's work, to involve children with disabilities in athletics. In 2003 he started the Hope and Possibility run. Today Achilles International has branched out to include research and exercise experiences for diabetics and people

with traumatic brain injury (TBI), and works with children on the autism spectrum in New York City schools.

With its "Running Your Life" motivational and physical training program at the Friedman Diabetes Institute of NY's Beth Israel Hospital, Achilles runners are contributing to research that has shown exercise to be as effective as medication in some instances in treating diabetes. Achilles also helps people with TBI at the NYU Medical Center Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation Medicine Brain Injury Day Treatment Center train for marathons. Through a second Achilles chapter at Rusk's physical therapy department, and through its participation in exercise and TBI research at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, Traum declared, "We've noted fantastic improvement with the TBI runners." Traum also reports seeing success with autism. Achilles has programs in 140 NYC schools, where a number of children are on the autism spectrum. Many are finding improvements in their social integration through their work with Achilles.

THE FREEDOM TEAM

As the U.S. ends its involvement in Iraq this winter, national focus will turn to Iraq War veterans reintegrating into American society. Dr. Traum and Achilles International have focused on these veterans since 2003, around the time media coverage began highlighting veterans returning from the conflict with severely disabling wounds. Traum and Achilles vice-president Mary Bryant started visiting Walter Reed Army Medical Center, then in Washington D.C., to encourage the wounded soldiers to

consider running. In their two dozen trips to Walter Reed Traum and Bryant promoted the Achilles approach of physical strengthening, confidence building, and supportive community to the specific needs of wounded veterans—"our country's heroes," Traum said. In 2005, Bryant named the group The Achilles Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans.

"It wasn't easy," Traum reported. "We would encourage these veterans to run and resume an active life. They would tell us 'I lost my leg three weeks ago. I'm not interested in running.' Imagine yourself in a hospital and some old guy comes in and says you need to train for a marathon."

Over time some of the veterans decided they were up for the challenge. "Virtually every person who is wounded is an athlete. If you joined the armed services you're an athlete: the training, the running, the wall-climbing—all of that is athletics. We provided the veterans a goal to help them get back to an active life. The physical therapists at Walter Reed supported us and became our buddies. More veterans started working out, and doing marathons. Soldiers who were having 10, 20 or 40 surgeries would return to the hospital to applause with a marathon medal around their neck. The spirit was catching. Patients started asking their doctors to schedule surgeries around their marathons. The training distracted the veterans from a boring existence, and the activity improved their spirits, and raised their level of aspiration. They got to bond with a group, and their body language encouraged others, saying: 'I may have lost a couple of legs, but I haven't lost the ability to

be active and part of a team,'" Traum said.

The Achilles program for veterans evolved as did the war. "When we started going to Walter Reed typically we saw soldiers who had lost a leg. By 2008, we saw soldiers who had lost two legs and an arm. The explosive devices (IEDs) became

more sophisticated, and so did the process of saving lives in the field. Today field medics are saving people they never could before. We have quadruple amputees running."

Initially, Traum and Bryant encouraged people to run on an artificial limb. "We realized this was pretty hard, especially if the residual limb was still healing. Consequently, Achilles introduced specialized and adaptive devices, including the hand-crank wheelchair. "First they train with a hand-crank, and do a marathon with a hand-crank. Next they may run on their artificial leg, or legs. The Hope and Possibility 5 mile race is important, as a bridge to longer races for some," Traum explained.

"We had one soldier, Major David Rozelle, who wanted to rejoin his battalion in Iraq. The Army said he couldn't return to combat because he only had one leg. He told them 'I just did a marathon'. The Army let him reenlist. He is the first person in U.S. history to return to battle with an artificial limb."

Achilles' affiliation with the veterans didn't miss a step when the 102-year-old Walter Reed Army Medical Center of Washington D.C. closed in August 2011. Achilles relocated with the hospital's patients and staff to the new Walter Reed National Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. Achilles also reaches out to veterans at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego, CA, and Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, TX. "Close to 1,000 veterans, men and women are part of our program," said Traum.

The organization's latest achievement is its Kayaking Team for Wounded Veterans and Disabled Persons. Achilles International launched kayak programs on NY's Hudson River and Long Island Sound in 2007. Since 2010, Achilles teams have competed in major East Coast kayak races. Last summer Traum himself was a fierce contender throughout a four-hour 20-mile race in Massachusetts. "Kayaking is a beautiful transition, particularly for the veterans. It's a way to mainstream. For an amputee, kayaking provides a level playing field," said Traum.

Learn more at www.achillesinternational.org, and read Huffington Post's "Greatest Person of the Day" profile of Dick Traum at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/social/cssi-mi/dick-traum-disabled-veterans-athletes>. ■



Dick Traum '58 runs with President Bill Clinton.