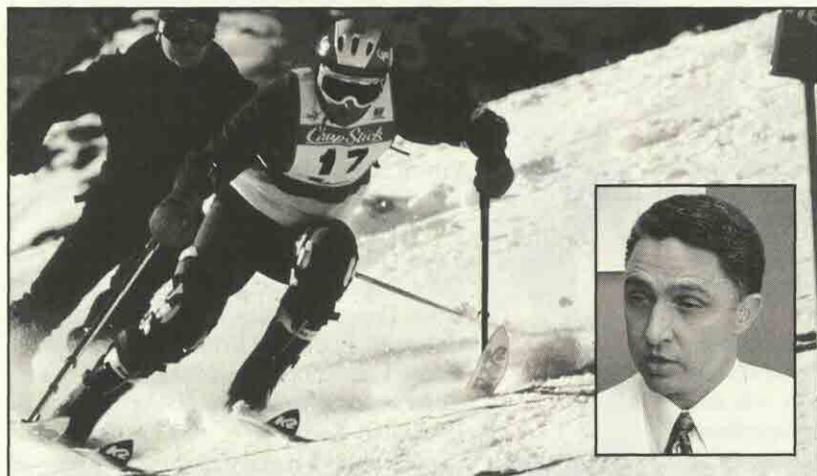


Giving Disabled Veterans the Business

Urban Miyares



Urban Miyares, Outstanding Disabled American Vet of 1994.

Urban Miyares, the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year, gives disabled veterans the business—literally. President and guiding spirit behind the Disabled Businesspersons Association of San Diego, Calif., Miyares helps disabled entrepreneurs nationwide start their own businesses.

The DAV will recognize Miyares as the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year at the 73rd National Convention of the DAV and Auxiliary in Chicago, August 20-25.

On his way to becoming an entrepreneur's entrepreneur, the Vietnam veteran suffered a number of setbacks and gained experience as a soldier, businessman, husband, father, blind skier, and "Spiderman."

They nicknamed him "Spiderman" because of the way Miyares clung to the walls and blindly felt his way along the VA's Western Blind Rehabilitation Center (WBRC) at Palo Alto, Calif.

Miyares, a life member of DAV Chapter 2 in San Diego, Calif., became blind in 1984 due to diabetes. He also suffers a hearing loss, kidney disease, and neuropathy (loss of feeling) in his legs. The neuropathy and blindness caused him to cling to the center walls for balance and orientation.

Being at WBRC learning to cope with the disability was a major feat for Miyares. When diabetes took his sight, he suffered severe depression, became withdrawn, and all but refused to leave his home until he went for rehabilitation training at WBRC.

While attending computer training at WBRC in 1986, Miyares heard about the first National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic at Grand Junction, Colo. Now an annual event, the clinic is sponsored by the DAV and VA, with financial assistance from business and private donors.

Originally, a man at WBRC asked if Miyares wanted to go skiing at some kind of "winter sports clinic thing" that was starting up.

"Listen, I told him. I'm from New York. I moved to San Diego. I don't like the snow. I've never been on a pair of skis. I'm a concrete baby; I'm not crazy; and besides that, I'm blind," Miyares said.

But, the "concrete baby," a.k.a. "Spiderman," changed his mind

and went skiing. According to Miyares' wife, JoAnn, the decision changed his life.

"The Winter Sports Clinic helped Urban a lot," JoAnn said. "The first year he attended was tough. He wanted to come home the first day he got off the slopes, but Sandy Trombetta, the clinic organizer and recreation therapist at the Grand Junction VA Medical Center, convinced Urban to try again. The rest is history."

With self-determination, pursuit of excellence and a love affair with skiing, Miyares went from a bumbling beginner on the bunny (low and slow beginner) slope to exceeding 63 miles per hour to rank as the number one B-1 (totally blind) blind downhill skier in the world. His skiing awards include the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic 1988 Linnie Howard Spirit Award, the San Diego Hall of Champions Museum 1990 Disabled Athlete of the Year award, and the 1990 and '91 U.S. National Disabled Alpine Ski Championships.

No decision since his decision to return to the field during the Vietnam War had as much impact on Miyares. However, in 1968, returning to the field wasn't entirely voluntary.

The Army's answer to Sgt. Miyares' repeated trips to sick call basically boiled down to, "Get your act together and get back in the field, or we'll make you a private again, sergeant."

The message was clear. The Army suspected him of malingering, and that didn't sit well with the 9th Infantry Division platoon sergeant. Miyares geared up and moved to the field with his troops. The blurred vision, severe stomach cramps, headaches, constant fatigue, and vomiting would have to take a back seat to the war.

His platoon came under attack in the field. Miyares heard explosions, thought they were mortars and collapsed.

Two days later, he emerged from a diabetic coma in a Saigon hospital. Miyares spent the next four months in hospitals in Japan and the U.S. before being medically discharged from the Army with a service-connected disability for diabetes.

The Army had been right. The sergeant became a private, a private citizen fighting a new war against diabetes. But Miyares wasn't alone. He had an ally. JoAnn, was by his side the moment he returned home.

"When Urban left for Vietnam, we'd only been married a short time," JoAnn said. "When he came home, it was harder controlling diabetes. We didn't know as much about it as we do today, and were learning and adjusting to diabetes at the same time we were building our marriage. We had our ups and downs in those days, but Urban is very self-determined and motivated, and we got through it.

"When our son, Urban Paul, was born, Urban was a really good father. He liked to do little league and soccer with him, and we did all the things families do.

"But, if daddy wasn't feeling good, our son knew it was because daddy was a diabetic. When children are younger, they don't always understand what that means, but as our son grew he understood more and more. When Urban became blind our son was very understanding of it, and at 24, he's adjusted very well to all that's happened. Whenever we need him, he's there."

Landing meaningful and productive employment was hard for Miyares. He became so frustrated with available jobs that he went into business for himself.

In 1971, he opened his first business, a small New Jersey construction firm. It didn't last long, but Miyares discovered he loved being a businessman. He had an appetite and aptitude for business. He moved on to open his own retail stores, restaurants, sales

organizations, a manufacturing company and a public relations firm. Business ventures led him from coast to coast, gaining experience along the way.

After his blindness, Miyares couldn't find resources for a blind businessman.

"They tried tremendously to help me at the Blind Rehabilitation Center, but the only resources for a businessperson were for the non-disabled and non-blind," Miyares said. "The more I searched for resources and assistance to benefit a blind businessperson, the more I couldn't find any."

"I took business courses, but again, they were slanted toward the non-disabled employer or employee. At that point, I knew that if people who are disabled are to compete in this world and be productive, we have to compete on a non-disabled basis. I also knew we couldn't do it without information and assistance. When I tried to get answers to my questions, I got nothing—not even encouragement or advice. What I got a lot of was 'sorry' and 'blind people can't do that.' I became so frustrated in 1985, I made a business of helping disabled veterans. I chose disabled veterans because that's what I am. I knew a lot of disabled veterans. Some were in business and some were talking about starting a business. I started offering free consulting advice and helped 10-20 people the first year."

Business to business assistance

The business grew and, eventually, he was helping thousands nationwide. Miyares expanded the business to include all disabled persons, and in 1991 formed the Disabled Businesspersons Association (DBA), a non-profit public charity and educational organization. Today, the DBA continues to assist disabled entrepreneurs and professionals maximize their potential in the business world, and encourages participation and enhances performance of disabled persons in the workforce, all free of charge. The only payment asked of disabled clients is that they, in turn, volunteer their time and expertise to assist other disabled persons.

Miyares has received many awards for his business accomplishments. They include the Blinded Veterans Association 1988 Irving Deaner Award; U.S. Small Business Administration 1991 National Veteran Small Business Advocate of the Year; 1991 California Certification of Recognition for Small Business Advocacy; San Diego Center for the Disabled 1992 Independence Award; a 1992 Presidential Point of Light Award, presented to him at a White House ceremony by former President George Bush; and 1994 San Diego Entrepreneur of the Year Supporter of Entrepreneurship Award. He is also a finalist for the upcoming Inc. Magazine Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

According to Miyares, the DBA is the first organization to target the role of disabled persons in business. Current DBA data shows 32 percent of all persons assisted by DBA are veterans; 10 percent are service-connected disabled veterans; and 22 percent are nonservice-connected veterans. Miyares isn't satisfied with the figures.

"I'd like to help more disabled veterans or, at least, see more investigating self-employment," Miyares said. "Many will find out, as I have, that just being active and productive will improve your health, relationships, and quality of life."

Miyares is quick to share credit for his success with his business partner and long-time friend Clay Chong (they own NUVENCO Group, a San Diego-based product and business management firm where Chong is president and Miyares vice president); Chong's wife, Jan, administrative supervisor for the organization; and JoAnn.

"I wouldn't have been able to do what I've done without JoAnn," Miyares said.

"My disability has never been a barrier to our marriage. Understanding is the key. Our marriage has grown through the years. We're more than husband and wife; we're best friends. She's a valuable part of the DBA and also consults with wives of disabled persons. She has experience with people with a variety of disabilities and has lots of valuable information to share with wives under stress or having problems; she's a good sounding board from the heart."

JoAnn says working with Urban in the office is fun. She calls herself the receptionist, but, in truth, admits it would be very hard to train someone to do what she does for her husband.

"I make sure he gets his lunch on time, take his blood tests throughout the day, and make sure there's a snack around," JoAnn said. "He has to eat on time and properly to maintain his energy and blood sugar level. I also car pool him around and help with his schedule."

Maintaining Miyares' schedule would be a busy job for nearly anyone. In addition to running DBA, Miyares finds time to be liaison for blinded veterans at the San Diego VA Medical Center, an inventor, lecturer, member and co-founder of the Mira Mesa/Scripps Ranch Chamber of Commerce, author, business columnist for the "San Diego Union-Tribune" newspaper, co-host of "San Diego Inventors and Inventions" on KFMB-TV, and many other business, military, civic and athletic organization activities.

Miyares is also founder and regular crew member of "Challenged America," a racing crew of disabled and able-bodied sailors who compete in major ocean-racing events. The crew's goal is to enter and complete the biennial Transpac race from Long Beach, Calif., to Hawaii in 1995.

Cameron, Miyares' German Shepherd seeing-eye-dog, probably won't make the Transpac. It's one of the few times you won't find the two together. Cameron can find his way out of a crowded reception faster than a waiter with an empty hors d'oeuvre tray, and can locate Miyares' van in a crowded parking lot with a simple command.

"I don't know what we'd do without Cameron," JoAnn said. "The independence Cameron gives Urban is phenomenal. Urban did excellent with his cane, but with Cameron, Urban gets from point A to point B in a snap-quicker than I can take him."

Asked what is most special about her husband, JoAnn, with quiet conviction, says, "I think it's helping other disabled people. Urban is genuinely concerned that the disabled community is not getting a fair share, and he goes out of his way to help disabled people."



Disabled Businesspersons Association President Urban Miyares discusses the ins and outs of business ownership with other disabled persons visiting his organization's exhibition booth at the 2nd Annual Start Your Own Business Expo in San Diego, Calif.