



October 31, 2016

Medal-winning Paralympic athlete urges NAVAIR employees to 'know no limits'



"There is no losing: You either win or learn," award-winning Paralympian Oscar "Oz" Sanchez told NAVAIR employees at a National Disability Employment Awareness Month event Oct. 19.

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — From the streets of Los Angeles to a three-time Paralympic athlete, Oscar "Oz" Sanchez is no stranger to pushing the limit.

His motto, "Know No Limits," characterizes his ability to overcome challenges, including dabbling in drugs, going on two deployments to the Middle East and suffering from a spinal cord injury that cut short his military career and sent him into a deep depression.

"This philosophy stems from multiple different experiences, a series of events that slowly transition our mindset to a higher standard," Sanchez, who spoke as part of NAVAIR's National Disability Employment Awareness Month event Oct. 19, explained to the approximately 250 attendees.

Growing up in east LA, the product of two first-generation Mexican immigrants, Sanchez said his late teen years were riddled with misdirection and anger.

"I lacked self-confidence and the knowledge of what to do with my life after high school," he said, eschewing college for drugs and befriending gang members.



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After being arrested for looting at age 18 and subsequently lying to the judge about his aspirations to join the military to get out of going to jail, he found himself, 24 hours later, on a bus as a new Marine Corps recruit.

"In the military, we found what we didn't have at home: guidance, structure, community," Sanchez said, referring to his older brother, who joined the Army. Both decided to make it their career, and friendly competition between the two helped motivate Sanchez.

"I was a new me on a pretty good high," he recalled.

Unfortunately, shortly after deciding to transfer to the Navy SEALs, and just eight days before marrying his fiancé, he was in a hit-and-run accident while riding his motorcycle. He found himself lying in a ditch on a pile of rocks, which resulted in a spinal cord injury that left him with near-complete paralysis of his lower extremities.

"The next six months were a whirlwind of painkillers and learning everything again," he said. "I was unwilling to accept my circumstances and allow anyone else to deal with them on my behalf. I was going down as a sinking ship; that was my choice."

He and his wife separated six months later. His depression lasted five years.

Eventually, Sanchez decided to fight one of his biggest phobias — going to college — and earned his bachelor's degree from San Diego State University, the first in his family to graduate from an American university.

"My life was dictated by fear, more so than courage or ambition," he said. "Fear literally paralyzed my growth."

He also took up cycling again, a hobby he enjoyed before his injury, and he has won six medals in his last three Paralympic games.

"It was a rush; I felt good, I felt alive, I wanted to ride my bike into happiness," he said.

Sanchez encouraged employees to reframe their negative self-talk in a more positive light and to take responsibility for their choices and actions.

"That self-talk is a choice," he said. "We can control the thoughts we dwell on. Whether we say we can or we can't, we're always right."

As a survivor of depression, Sanchez said he had to choose not to place blame on his circumstances and to reframe his life. He hopes to share his story with others to help them navigate the pitfalls of falling into certain frames of thought.

"Those hardships force us to grow," he said. "It's that resistance that takes the airplane off the ground and into the air. Look for the silver lining, the lesson, and then all of life"



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becomes an experience and a beautiful journey.”

The event, with a theme of #InclusionWorks, was sponsored by NAVAIR’s Individuals with Disabilities Action Team and Equal Employment Opportunity and Diversity Office.

Alec “Ed” Forsman was also recognized at the event for winning an [Individual Achievement Award](#) at the 36th annual Department of Defense Disability Awards ceremony Oct. 4. Forsman is one of the 0.8 percent of individuals with targeted disabilities who work at NAVAIR.

“We’re here today to recognize the contributions people with disabilities make to the command and to the nation,” said Stephen Cricchi, assistant commander for Corporate Operations and Total Force. “Their talent and persistence helps us shape the workforce.”

Cricchi said the Individuals with Disabilities Action Team has made great strides, including updating supervisory training, identifying recruiting outreach strategies, encouraging employees to self-identify their disabilities and exploring improvements to facilities. [Find out more about NAVAIR’s initiatives and programs for individuals with disabilities.](#)