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**Peer Mentors Build Strong Connections at Craig Hospital**

When Jose Reyes was a patient at Craig Hospital back in 2016, he remembers feeling extremely overwhelmed. Not only did he worry about his day-to-day rehabilitation, but he felt anxious about what his life would look like after Craig.

“At that time, I did not have a lot of support or community connections,” he recalls. “I had nobody to talk to about my fears and nobody to learn from. I was scared to go home, and I felt alone.”

**A Personal Agenda**



It was March 2016 when Jose’s life changed forever. He was riding his bike on Denver’s Cherry Creek Trail when he collided with another biker. Jose fell on the concrete path along the trail and sustained a [brain injury](https://craighospital.org/brain-injury-rehabilitation).

“In addition to losing three months of memory, I sustained fractures on C4 and C5 and broke numerous bones,” Jose says. He spent one month in a coma in the ICU and 2.5 months at Craig, returning home in a wheelchair.

About two years later, Jose still remembered how overwhelmed he felt during his stay at Craig and decided to help others in the same situation. He became a [volunteer](https://craighospital.org/volunteer) at the hospital and began visiting patients. As a Spanish speaker, he made an effort to seek out fellow Spanish speakers who needed extra support.

“I had a personal agenda to help others, so I approached Erik Hjeltnes [Craig’s Peer Mentor Coordinator] about turning my visits into a weekly Spanish-speaking support group,” Jose says. “Erik loved the idea.”

Today, the number of group members ranges from six to 12 people, with most members having a [spinal cord injury](https://craighospital.org/spinal-cord-injury-rehabilitation). “We talk about our injuries, support each other, provide feedback, and empower one another. Creating connections is very important to us, and we all work together on coping and recovery.”

In addition to patients, Jose also stresses the importance of family support within the group.

“Having this type of peer group back in 2016 would have been so helpful for my spouse and me,” Jose explains. “Because these traumatic injuries also happen to family members, support is vital for everyone. As a result, I try to bring in the family as much as possible. We also welcome non-Craig grads who hear about the group from current members, and we meet virtually to accommodate out-of-town members.”

One such member is 35-year-old Gerardo Verdugo, a forklift driver from California, who spent five months at Craig after sustaining a C4-6 spinal cord injury in a work accident.

“While at Craig, I had so many questions and concerns. And because English is not easy for me, I welcomed the Spanish-speaking support,” he says. “After my accident, I was in a very bad place, but I learned how to live life and find a new normal. The group allows me to share and connect with others.”

He adds, “My hope is to move to Colorado in the future and become a peer mentor, so I can help others—just like Jose helped me.”

**Providing Support and Guidance**

This help is the main goal of Craig’s [Peer Mentor program](https://craighospital.org/volunteer/peer-mentor-program-at-craig). “Peer mentorship exists to foster connections between individuals living with spinal cord or brain injury,” explains Erik. “After medical care and therapies, many people encounter difficulties re-entering their communities. But peer mentors bridge that gap by helping patients ease into their new lives. They provide valuable insight into what life with a disability can look like.”

According to Erik, peer mentors are typically matched with patients based on similar diagnosis, experience, age and interests. Not only is support offered to patients, but also to caregivers and family members.

Participating in the program is extremely beneficial and provides emotional support, friendship, social connections, resources and advice for daily living.

**Sharing Lessons Learned**



Offering advice on how to live with paralysis is one of Josh Stapen’s favorite roles as a peer mentor. After sustaining a spinal cord injury at age 29 due to transverse myelitis (inflammation of the spinal cord), Josh wanted to help others.

“Back in 2004, there were no peer mentors at Craig,” he recalls. “While my care team taught me so much about the medical stuff, I had nobody to talk to about actually living each day in a wheelchair.”

So Josh became a peer mentor several years ago and began teaching the “Wheelers” class two times a week at Craig. “The one-hour class is for quads in manual chairs, who have trouble navigating corners, steps, curbs and other obstacles,” he says. “I teach numerous wheelchair skills, and I answer questions about life in a wheelchair.”

The class is also about sharing experiences and connecting with others. When asked about why he enjoys teaching the class, Josh insists that he feels great satisfaction in helping others: “After 19 years in a chair, I have real-world experience that I want to pass on. I get to be the person that I needed way back when. I know firsthand that it’s not easy, so if I can make life better for others, that makes me happy.”

***For more information on Craig Hospital’s Peer Mentor program, contact 303.789.8017 or visit***[***www.craighospital.org/peer-mentor***](https://craighospital.org/volunteer/peer-mentor-program-at-craig)***.***