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## Quadriplegic lawyer Ken Kunken '72 inspires by example of dogged persistence

By Sarah Palmer

Ken Kunken '72 completed his bachelor's degree in engineering after severing his spinal cord in a sprint football accident when he was 20 years old and a student at Cornell. As a quadriplegic, he earned two master's degrees and a juris doctorate. Kunken spoke Oct. 5 to an audience of students and faculty in the ILR Conference Center about his time on the Hill and his post-Cornell career.

"I knew that because of my physical limitations, in order to be successful I had to make the most of my mental abilities," Kunken said.



*Daniel Faraone/University Photographer*

**Ken Kunken '72 meets with students after his Oct. 5 campus talk.**

At the time of his injury, physicians said Kunken would probably not survive, and that if he did live, he would spend his life in a nursing home. Although paralyzed from the shoulders down, Kunken refused to resign himself to such an existence. "I did not want to be treated like an invalid," he said. "I was convinced that my life still had value, and I was determined to live a life that had meaning."

Kunken applied himself to his studies, returning to Cornell to complete his undergraduate degree in 1973, decades before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Before this law was enacted, many buildings were inaccessible to wheelchairs, and there were virtually no curb cuts, so managing the campus was a challenge. In addition, when Kunken returned to Cornell again to study for a master's degree in education, he had to type his own thesis, averaging 12 words a minute.

"We all face challenges in our journey through life; how we handle those challenges will determine not only how successful we'll be, but also how happy and content," Kunken said.

Kunken handled his challenges with perseverance. After completing his master's at Cornell, he earned a second master's degree in psychological counseling and rehabilitation at Columbia University. After a yearlong job search, he took a job at a human resources center in Albertson, Long Island; he was awarded Rehabilitant of the Year in 1977 for excelling in the position.

Kunken then entered Hofstra University School of Law in 1979, where he earned his juris doctorate. He now works as an assistant district attorney and deputy chief of the County Court Trial Bureau in Nassau, Long Island, where he supervises 27 other assistants.

His talk was sponsored by the Cornell Union for Disabilities Awareness.

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