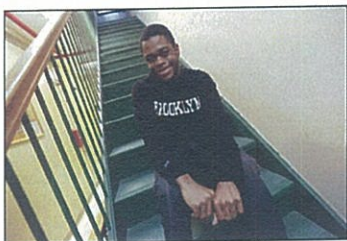


Ignoring Limitations and Aiming to Inspire

By JOHN OTIS



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Otis Hampton, who was born with cerebral palsy, currently lives in a homeless shelter in Harlem.

Otis Hampton once walked 40 blocks in Manhattan, and swelled with pride when he reached his destination.

His journey had been difficult — for him, walking is laborious and painful — and he was unable to match the brisk pace of the people alongside him, most of whom could take for granted their ease of mobility. Mr. Hampton, who was born with cerebral palsy, has never had that luxury.

When he exerts himself to that degree, it is always with a purpose. Not only does Mr. Hampton, 22, refuse to accept limitations, but he also strives to inspire others.

“I feel like when I take walks, or when I’m walking in general, there may be a kid I know with cerebral palsy who’s been wanting to take a step without falling that finally gets up out of his or her wheelchair and takes those steps for the first time,” he said.

Growing up, Mr. Hampton was often teased by classmates and was stigmatized both for his disability and for the time he spent in the foster care system. He was adopted at age 8, but his adoptive father died after a stroke two years later.

Last February, Mr. Hampton was forced to confront a new challenge: homelessness.

“I came home and saw suitcases out in front of the house,” he said. “I originally thought it was someone going on vacation.”

Instead, it was Mr. Hampton who was leaving. His adoptive mother had decided to ask him to leave after the most recent of what Mr. Hampton said were increasingly frequent disputes. He ended up in the shelter system and dropped out of Kingsborough Community College, where he had been enrolled. Since April, he has been living at Create, a shelter in Harlem.

His income consists of less than \$300 a month in public assistance and food stamps. He also receives Medicaid and earns a \$50 stipend whenever he writes an essay for Represent magazine, a publication aimed at children in foster care.

Create is in the process of helping Mr. Hampton find work as well as return to college. To help him with bills, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New York, one of the agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, drew \$286 from the fund so that he could cover months of cellphone charges and buy MetroCards.

For as long as he can remember, Mr. Hampton said, he has simply wanted to become self-reliant.

“Throughout my life, I’ve wanted to do things that other people could do,” he said. “Regular things like being able to take public transportation, getting a girlfriend, and being able to maintain a job.”

He said the negativity of being told that he could not do some things “drove me to try and do whatever I felt like I could do.”

His aspiration to one day become a professional wrestler dominated his

childhood thoughts. So did constant discouragement. Mr. Hampton said he was often told that because of his cerebral palsy, his ambitions were mere pipe dreams.

That changed when he saw the professional wrestler Zach Gowen — whose left leg was amputated when he was a child — hold his own in the ring. Mr. Hampton learned then that words mean nothing when measured against heart.

“I saw him wrestle and was like, ‘If he can do this, I can too,’” said Mr. Hampton, adding that he uses that idea to encourage others with cerebral palsy.

“If I meet somebody with the same condition who says they’re not able to do this, they’re not able to do that, I tell them that they can if they just give it a try.”

That positive advocacy extends to other parts of his life. Mr. Hampton is active in several programs run by a foster care agency, including one called the Alumni Group, whose participants mostly discuss ways to improve the foster care system. He is also part of a drama therapy group and serves as a mentor in a program called AdoptMent.

Mr. Hampton said his relationship with his mother had improved since he left her home. He said he was waiting to learn if he could re-enroll in college, and he has recently begun applying for jobs at some large retail stores.

“I don’t want to tell people, ‘Oh, that’s just the way it goes, that you can’t do this or you can’t do that,’” he said. “I want to give people the idea that they can do this.” ■