

## Local News

# Wolfe devotes life to fighting for those with disabilities

By Carlos Holmes  
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Jamie Wolfe has an agenda. She never rolls into Legislative Hall without one.

To live her life to its fullest potential, she has had to fight all her life against attitudes and perceptions that would have left her institutionalized because of her physical handicap. Now Wolfe uses that tenacity – and her personal experience at striving for independent living – to bring about legislation to improve the quality of life of those who live with disabilities.

Born with birth defects that resulted in underdeveloped muscles, the 38-year-old Dover native is wheelchair bound. Essentially she has no use of her legs and limited use of her arms, wrists and shoulders.

Able to get around in her motorized/computerized wheelchair, Wolfe has all the mobility she needs to be an effective disabilities advocate. A regular presence at Legislative Hall, she and other representatives of disabilities organizations work to help the elected General Assembly members understand the needs and challenges facing those with disabilities, as well as educate them on some of the legislative remedies that could address them.

Wolfe said it is important that those with disabilities are represented in the General Assembly because that is where the laws are made that will impact them, for better or for worse.

“In order to achieve true equality the laws have to facilitate that,” she said. “If the legislator aren’t hearing it from the people who are affected, then these elected officials will believe what they are doing is enough.

“Hence our roles as a disabilities advocate, to provide that voice and educate legislators on the issues those with disabilities face,” Wolfe said.

To date, the work of Wolfe and her colleagues – Pat Maichle,

executive director of the Developmental Disabilities Council, and Kyle Hodges, administrator of the state Council for Persons with Disabilities – has resulted in the enactment of three legislative bills:

- A 2001 measure that established a program through which people with disabilities can receive state financial assistance to help cover the cost for paid attendants.
- A 2004 amendment to the Nurse Practices Act that allows licensed health care professionals to authorize an unlicensed attendant to administer certain health care acts that had previously had been prohibited, such as assisting with medication or a wound.
- A 2004 measure that establishes a “lemon law” for technology devices that assist people with disabilities, requiring that such technology include a one-year warranty.

Maichle said Wolfe is a dedicated partner to have in the legislative trenches. “She advocates for people of all disabilities, not just physical disabilities,” Maichle said. “The legislators respect her and treat her fairly, which is what we expect.”

Speaker of the House Terry R. Spence said Wolfe is an inspiration to him and the rest of the General Assembly. “I have total respect for how she works hard at watching and studying legislation that affects people with disabilities,” Spence said. “It’s a joy to work with her and to know what she stands for.”

Wolfe refuses to settle for less than what is possible in her life, nor does she want other people with disabilities to have to either. She gets such a mindset from her parents, who refused to believe the so-called professionals’ assessment of their child’s future.

“One of the psychologists told us when she was a child that the time would come that she would eventually be institutionalized, but we said ‘no way,’” recalled Sheila Wolfe, Wolfe’s mother. “While we knew that she was physically handicapped, we knew she was fine in every other way.”

Buoyed by the support and encouragement of Mrs. Wolfe and the late Martin Wolfe (who died in 1979), Wolfe has pretty much gone through life refusing to believe the conventional thinking on what she can or can’t do. After being enrolled as a child in the then-Kent County Orthopedic School (now the Kent County Community School), she insisted on regular schooling at Dover High School, from which she graduated in 1984.

“Jamie used to go all over the place in her wheelchair, even crossing the highway in it,” Wolfe said. “People used to say, ‘How can you let her do that?’ I would respond, ‘Let her?’ We couldn’t stop her.”

“I shouldn’t be held down because the system thinks that I am being

too radical,” Wolfe said. “I don’t know any other way to live.”

She went on to complete an associate’s degree in human services from Delaware Technical and Community College in 1987; a bachelor’s degree in sociology in 1991, and a master’s degree of social work from Delaware State University in 1995.

Her passion for disabilities advocacy has continued to be a major part of her livelihood. After working five years for Independent Resources Inc., a disabilities advocacy agency, she now works part-time for the Center for Disability Studies.

While her current job complements her work in the legislature, she has some new career options that could add to her growing résumé of disabilities advocacy work. She is considering taking the Law School Admissions Test, and also the National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems has offered her an opportunity to work on a committee concerning self-advocacy issues.

While she is considering those choices, Wolfe and her colleagues are continuing their legislative work during the current General Assembly session, as they are working toward measures that would do away with Medicaid co-pay and require handicapped accessibility at gas stations.

And she continues to be passionate about finding ways for the disabled to get out of nursing homes. She is currently working on behalf of a man with a debilitating spinal injury at the Delaware Hospital for the Chronically Ill, who has been institutionalized for 30 years. “We are working to get him out of the institution,” she said.

Wolfe said what has happened to this man happens to many others. “If you choose the nursing home, that’s one thing. But a lot of people don’t choose, they are told that they must go there,” she said. “The minute you step into an institution, you lose all your freedoms. You are told when to get up, when to go to bed, who will be your roommate, how to decorate your room, and so on. It’s a quality of life issue.”

As a more than competent advocate for herself, Wolfe lives in her own apartment, manages her own bills, and has been able to use the existing federal and state disabilities systems get the attendant care she needs to help with the things she can’t do for herself.

But like others with disabilities, Wolfe has a fear that she will one day be forced to be institutionalized. “Once you are told that you might have to go into a nursing home, that fear never leaves,” Wolfe says.

She said it is a fear that keeps her fighting for herself – and others.