

N. Dale Wright Distinguished Alumnus Speech  
October 27, 2023  
Dale Hull (EMPA 2012), Executive Director, Neuroworx

First, I would like to thank the Romney Institute MPA Program for this incredible recognition. I am both honored and humbled to be the recipient of this award. Twenty-four years ago, as I lay on my backyard trampoline, completely paralyzed from the shoulders down, I could have never imagined a moment such as this. Surreal seems an appropriate word. It is abundantly clear that one never knows exactly how the journey will evolve. However, it does give me pause when I consider this is happening in the same year that UFOs have officially been recognized as real and that Taylor Swift has single-handedly impacted the US economy and NFL viewership. Who would have thought? Nevertheless, thank you. I remain grounded and grateful.

Nothing of considerable consequence occurs in isolation. Even when it appears that only one individual is involved, God is always there. In my case, in addition to divine intervention, I need to recognize the extraordinary people in my life. First and foremost, is my wife Renee. She has stalwartly been there through all of our adventures, tragedies, and triumphs. Her patient, and sometimes appropriately impatient support, has been tremendous and essential. Thank you. I love you. I am also extremely grateful for the support of my four sons as they lived through and needed to adapt to our paralysis-affected life. They are all wonderful men.

I realize that the work I have been blessed to do at Neuroworx helping adults and children with paralysis over the past twenty years is the reason for this recognition. This would not have been possible without Jan Black as a business partner. It is truly a symbiotic effort. She is not only an extraordinary physical therapist, but an excellent, caring leader of people.

As I review my path to and through the MPA program specific individuals need recognition. Mike Bennett, my nephew, first introduced me to the MPA program when he was in the day program. That led to an introduction to Prof Jeff Thompson (a fan favorite) who invited me to speak to several of his classes. Prior to this, I was not aware of the MPA degree nor had any concept of what it was all about. The more I learned, the more I was intrigued. This occurred right at the time when my non-profit duties and responsibilities were accelerating. I called Prof Thompson for advice and counsel. In 2009, I enrolled in the executive MPA program as the oldest student in my class. My age was never an issue except for the time one of our courses required us to take our exam at the BYU main campus testing center. I noticed more than one student looking at me as if I was some sort of undercover test proctor pretending to take a test.

My EMPA class was a wonderful community of individuals with extraordinary talent and experience, which only added to the learning environment. As many of you know, the concept of working as teams is integral to the MPA curriculum. My teammates were amazing. Team Unity included Jeff Christiansen, Valerie Meade, Luke Alo, and Marcus Ottonelli. Their focus, dedication, work ethic, character, and humor made the challenges, stress, late nights, and accomplishments rich and rewarding. Many times, they chose Neuroworx as our group's project, which was very impactful to the organization's growth. I want to recognize that Jeff and Val have traveled to be here today. We'll have a virtual reunion with Luke and Marcos later this afternoon. They are some of the best human beings ever and I'm grateful to call them friends.

My recognition would be incomplete without a shout out to the well-prepared and insightful faculty. They were knowledgeable, personable, and always willing to listen. I believe it was just the right mix of theory and the practical. It was an excellent education (even if I had to take an accounting class).

My MPA experience and education was superb and continues to be a strong component of my non-profit and legislative work. The primary net result is an increased personal confidence when facing the myriad of problems that occur while managing a rehab clinic functioning as a small business combined with mission-focused fundraising. To all who have contributed, thank you for helping our work of providing an extraordinary after-hospital rehabilitation opportunity for individuals facing the devastation of paralysis. You are with us every day.

The work we do at Neuroworx is all about people. People whose lives have been turned upside down through traumatic accidents and conditions. Individuals who desperately want a chance to restore as much of their life as possible. In fact, we refer to this as the remarkable journey of recovery. Difficult is an understatement. What makes the whole thing even more problematic is that no two neurological injuries are the same and no two recoveries follow the same path. That means all the restorative and adaptive therapy we provide needs to be customized for every individual. It requires knowledgeable and creative therapists functioning as the artisans using state-of-the-art equipment to create a path for the journey. The third critical component is time. This type of rehabilitation requires considerable time, a must-needed component that insurance companies most often do not supply. Our mission is to provide the care that will change lives while overcoming the financial and access barriers to that opportunity. Yes, it's a crazy idea. We often joke that we have a terrible business model but a great people model.

To make the landscape even more challenging, there are other forms of paralysis that often occur concurrently. These individuals feel paralyzed emotionally, mentally, psychologically, spiritually, and even financially. Helping these individuals through those types of paralysis can be just as challenging if not more so.

The people we help are some of the most grateful, resilient, courageous, and tenacious individuals I have had the opportunity to associate with. Although everyone would like a complete restoration of their abilities, unfortunately most will end up with some residual disability. However, if we help them overcome the non-physical aspects of paralysis, they are empowered to accomplish great things. I'd like to share one example.

Bernard was in his mid-twenties when a skydiving accident resulted in very dense lower extremity paralysis. His girlfriend abandoned the relationship, and his parents were gone, leaving him to face the circumstances completely alone. He found his way to our clinic wanting and hoping for that holy grail of restored walking. He struggled psychologically and was in my office on multiple occasions contemplating suicide. We talked, we cried, many times and eventually I convinced him to give the process one year before taking his life. He worked so hard but eventually came to the very painful realization that he would need to use a wheelchair for the foreseeable future. He eventually left us with a vision and goal of finishing college, which he did. But he didn't stop there. He had considered veterinary medicine before his injury but now thought it was impossible. Undaunted, he vigorously pursued that dream and he became the first wheelchair user to be admitted to Colorado State's School of Veterinary Medicine. He graduated two years ago and is now completing a residency in veterinary radiology. He recently sent me a video of him in the iFly wind tunnel as he plans his return to skydiving. That's what we are privileged to witness. Even though his body no longer walks, his spirit is literally sprinting. I couldn't be more proud of him.

I believe this is the essence of what MPA work is all about. It's about people. In fact, I would suggest that from now on when you see the abbreviation MPA that you occasionally substitute the word "people" for the word "public". It will make it more personal and remind us that all the work we do is all about people and their needs.

I often think of the Mother Theresa quote, "It is difficult to do great things, but we can all do small things with great love."

The MPA program at BYU empowers its students to do many things with great love. Both great and small. The legacy leadership of Jesus Christ provides a foundation of principles, example, and power that never fails. I'm proud to be part of it.

I have lived with paralysis for twenty-four plus years. It is tough. I miss my body every day. However, here is the surprising paradox - because the things I've learned, the experiences I've had, the people I'm privileged to meet, and the perspective gained because of my injury, are so rich and rewarding that given the chance to go back, I would do it again. I'm far enough into my journey that I can say that the worst thing that has ever happened to me, is the best thing to ever happen to me.

May you all be so blessed.

Thank you again for this opportunity.