

Crash victim on a mission to promote stem cell research

By Ginelle G. Torres
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Sabrina Cohen zips around her Miami Beach office, prepping for another day on the brutal campaign trail.

As Tuesday's election draws near, Cohen, who runs a public relations firm, is frantically working to get voter support for stem cell research, which she hopes will some day make life better for people debilitated by injury or disease.

"I'm fighting to find a solution for anyone who is, or can be affected," said Cohen, 26, a quadriplegic since a car wreck on Halloween night 1992.

She was a passenger in a car that was sideswiped before it crashed into a parked car and a tree.

At age 14, three of her vertebrae discs were damaged. Since then, she has used a wheelchair.

"It was hard to adjust," Cohen said. "I thought it was temporary and I'd get up and walk at anytime."

Since April, Cohen has dedicated herself to promoting stem cell research, which some say could lead to cures for spinal chord injuries and conditions such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. To that end, she has organized a 4 p.m. wheelchair rally in commemoration of the late actor Christopher Reeve at the intersection of 27th Avenue and U.S. 1 in Coconut Grove.

"We wouldn't be as far as we are now if it weren't for him," she said.

Earlier this year, Reeve contacted the Genetics Policy Institute in Coral Gables, and taped a message for executive director Bernie Segal, to play at the United Nations in June.

"To not encourage the ethical pursuit of this research might result in needless human suffering and destroy the hope of those afflicted," Reeve said in the video.

Besides gathering information on stem cell research, the institute promotes human and therapeutic cloning of cells to create replacement organs, nerve tissue or skin.

"In a perfect world, the cells would be put in my back and I would get up and walk," said Cohen, who spent several months as a volunteer at the institute.

"She is a tremendous person and has helped put us on the map," Segal said.

For Cohen, fighting for the cause means speaking out against a 2001 decision by President Bush to limit stem cell research.



She understands that many people object to the research on ethical or religious grounds but she does not agree.

"If the restrictions would be lifted we could find cures for many things," she said. "They would rather preserve cells than preserve lives."

Cohen looks to U.S. Senate candidate Betty Castor, a Democrat, and Democratic nominee John Kerry for support. But she notes that prominent Republicans such as Nancy Reagan and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger also are dedicated to the cause.

"People are sick and dying and every faith believes in saving lives, we have the possibility to do that," she said.

"This is a nonpartisan issue; it's a human issue and science needs to move forward."

Ginelle G. Torres can be reached at ggtorres@sun-sentinel.com or 305-810-5001.

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