

A Funny Thing Can Happen on the Way to 2026: Using your voice for advocacy

By Jennifer Harrison

There once was a pioneer who spent more time in his covered wagon than he did in the tin tub at Ye Olde Homestead (although the settlers weren't known for terrific hygiene, so that's not saying much).

One frustration of maneuvering around on his rickety, wobbling wagon so often was the din it generated beneath it. One persistent, annoying, whining wheel – see where we're going with this? – would scrape and squeal and wail as it bumped over hill, divot, or stone. As the idea of foraging for WD-40 sounded about as appealing as using a bar of soap (again, hygiene issues), the man attempted to ignore the noise.

But day after day, week after week, mile after painful mile, the wheel slowly wore him down. The man eventually pulled over, climbed off his mobile milk carton, and, with spit and a prayer, lubricated the arid axle. It did a doozy on his back, but his ears felt immediate relief. The frontiersman schlepped on...

This is not a new story. Nor is it a particularly creative one. But, really, it's all about the Upshot.

Cliché be cursed, the squeaky wheel truly gets the grease.

And this is why:

If we don't let others know there is a problem, they don't know how to help us. Or even that they should.

If we don't let others know it loudly, they may too easily ignore us.

And if we don't let others know it loudly and often, they may wait and see if we'll go away.

Do not go away.

Self-advocacy is about deciding what you need, knowing your rights, planning your strategy, expressing yourself, asserting yourself, and staying persistent. (Like the story above, this is not revelatory. But it is an important reminder.)

There is an element of growing up with an intellectual or developmental disability called “learned acquiescence,” or “the culture of compliance,” in which children are taught to behave, not to talk back, not to question, not to defy. After all, there are so many ways in which we need to tend to our children, it is important to keep the process as low-maintenance as possible. However, with no blame to parents or teachers but as just an unfortunate byproduct of learning proper behavior, kids with disabilities interpret this “just be good” mandate as advice against speaking up for their wants and needs. Adherence to obedience often becomes the default, sometimes to the detriment of the people to whom we tend.

We can rewrite the narrative, however.

Encourage our loved ones with disabilities to identify what is important to them, help them discern the most effective way to advocate for change, and lend your voice to their efforts.

Model assertive behavior by standing up for what you need, too! (Self-confidence is a huge part of self-advocacy and, man, it’s a tough one. But as activist Maggie Kuhn once said, “Speak your mind even if your voice shakes.” It will soon steady itself!)

And seek out a community to fight alongside, like the [NJ Self-Advocacy Project](#) or [The Arc of NJ’s Youth Advisory Board](#).

Let’s make 2026 our most powerful year yet and make the change that matters in your world! Charles Ingalls would do it (he’d be ripe when he did it, but he’d do it); we all deserve to do it, too.