

Mr. Clark Goes to Washington

In 1939, Frank Capra directed the film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. It is a story about a man, Mr. Smith, who is approached to fill a vacancy in the United States Senate. He goes there not knowing much about Washington, D.C., let alone how to work in the political process.

Both Mr. Smith and Mr. Jesse Clark – a member of the Council for the Head Injured Community – are very similar.



Mr. Smith, played by Jimmy Stewart, strolls through Washington, D.C.



Jesse Clark speaking at the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey's annual seminar.

In May 2004, Mr. Clark accompanied Tom Grady, Director of Advocacy & Public Affairs for the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey, and Bill Ditto, Director of Disability Services for the NJ Department of Human Services, to Washington, D.C. Their purpose was to educate members of the New Jersey Congressional Delegation about the need for full funding of the Federal Traumatic Brain Injury Act. They met with aides of Congressmen Frelinghuysen, LoBiondo, Garrett, Pascrell and of Senators Lautenberg and Corzine.

Mr. Clark's road to Washington has been a long journey. On March 15, 1984, he sustained a brain injury when his vehicle skidded on black ice then crashed into a pole. Mr. Clark was in a coma for 14 days and, for 3 months, was not able to effectively communicate with people. "My memories of that timeframe are very limited," he says. "It was as though I was living in a fantasy."

During the mid-1980s, Mr. Clark began attending a brain injury support group. It was there, in 2002, that Mr. Clark spoke to Mike Greenwald, member of the Council for the Head Injured Community and host of Mike-at-the-Mike – a yearly segment of the Association's annual seminar. Mr. Clark became intrigued about Mike-at-the-Mike and decided to get involved through CHIC. "I got sucked into it willingly," he says.

Since that time, Mr. Clark has been involved in two Mike-at-the-Mike panels. "I find it very rewarding," he says. His easy-going demeanor and sincere, thorough communication style caught the attention of Tom Grady. "I thought he would be a good person to represent the brain injury community in Washington, D.C.," he said.

Mr. Clark's efforts contributed to an additional \$515,000 being appropriated to the Centers for Disease Control for brain injury-related services. "I was happy and proud to be a part of it," he says.

When asked what it takes to be an effective advocate, Mr. Clark said that having a brain injury for so long enabled him to confront many issues and, in turn, to discuss brain injury issues in a very straightforward manner.

In the movie, Mr. Smith uses his voice to convey his ideals. In real-life, Mr. Clark uses his voice to convey his experience with brain injury. His voice represented the many who are impacted with brain injury, a voice which contributed to the success of enhancing the Traumatic Brain Injury Act.