

# BOCA RATON TIMES

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## Businessman takes a stand for clients with disabilities

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Joseph Bensmihen didn't know he was disabled until he was 12 years old.

Now a 37-year-old businessman who owns two companies in Boca Raton, Bensmihen said his parents didn't treat their child who was born with cerebral palsy any differently than they treated his healthy sister.

But school officials in Montreal did. They refused to accept Bensmihen, who went to kindergarten at a children's hospital and began first grade at a center for crippled and disabled children.

For four years Bensmihen's parents became advocates for their young son, arguing that he had an

equal right to an education in a school with "normal" children.

Bensmihen was sent to a public school special education class and finally admitted to a regular class. He met with discrimination at the school and decided to attend the Hebrew Academy in Montreal. Bensmihen graduated as the class valedictorian and went on to get bachelor's and master's degrees in social work from Yeshiva University in New York.

"I got lucky and my mother and father were determined that I would be able-bodied within society," Bensmihen said. "Society has the handicap while the individual has the disability."

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At 22 he returned to Montreal and began a lobbying campaign to get Canada to pass a law like the recently enacted Americans with Disabilities Act, which took effect in July 1992. That law prohibited employers, state and local governments, employment agencies and labor unions from discriminating against qualified individuals in hiring and employment.

The son of advocates for their child became an advocate for the disabled.

In 1992 a reporter for the Montreal Gazette wrote, "Bensmihen, a crusader for the rights of the disabled, is banging on the doors of MPs [Members of Parliament] and government officials to try to bolster Canada's feeble imitation of a revo-

lutionary American integration act [to bring the disabled into U.S. society]."

Discouraged by the lack of progress the Canadian government was making in helping the country's 3.3 million disabled citizens, Bensmihen took his father's advice and moved to the United States.

He worked for home health companies in South Florida for three years, before starting his own. "I felt that I could do it better," he said. He also served as a geriatric care manager, appointed by the court as a guardian to supervise the care and financial affairs of individual seniors.

Today Bensmihen runs Boca Raton Home Care, the business he started in 1998, and United Elder Care Service, which opened in 2004.

Those who know Bensmihen say he is still

an advocate, not only for the few individuals he represents as a court-appointed guardian but also for the hundreds cared for by his home health businesses.

Elder law attorney Scott Solkoff characterized Bensmihen as a geriatric care manager who owns home health businesses. "He comes at this from a very personal viewpoint," said Solkoff, using the word "advocate" to describe Bensmihen.

"He started out as a self-advocate," said Sheldon R. Gelman, dean of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work at Yeshiva University, who has known Bensmihen since 1993, when Bensmihen was a graduate student.

"Just as he advocated for himself, he advocates for the persons he provides services for," Gelman said. "He's not afraid to get in your

face. He makes sure that the people who are responsible [for doing something] actually do it."

Bensmihen's goal is to provide for people, said Dr. Meyer Cohen, a Boca Raton internist who has known Bensmihen for eight years and refers patients to him. "He really cares about people," Cohen said. Bensmihen has invited patients to his home to celebrate Jewish holidays.

Bensmihen provides scholarships in his father David Bensmihen's name to Jewish children for formal Jewish education at Boca Raton Synagogue.

The younger Bensmihen credited his father for his own accomplishments. "I'm only successful because my father was a great man."



**SWEET SUCCESS:** Joseph Bensmihen, 37, of Boca Raton, has overcome cerebral palsy to start and operate two successful businesses - Boca Home Care Inc. and United Elder Care Services Inc., both in Boca Raton.

Staff photo/Kimberly DiMare