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HOPING FOR A CURE: Sabrina Cohen uses her advertising skills to launch a foundation to fund stem cell research

BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ

The first thing you might notice about Sabrina Cohen is her black motorized wheelchair as it zips here and there at her slightest command. The next thing will be how fast she talks, how much she wants to say and how passionately she feels about it.

"I always tell people that the strongest muscle in my body is my larynx," she says with a throaty laugh that lights up her brown eyes. "I love to talk, and I love to talk about this."

"This" is stem cell research and the nonprofit organization she has founded, The Sabrina Cohen Foundation for Stem Cell Research. Actually, what she likes to talk about most is hope. Hope that others will recognize the potential in stem cells. Hope for a cure. Hope that one day she will walk again.

To further the cause, her foundation is sponsoring its first fundraising event of the year, Bowling for Breakthroughs, on March 1. She's already signed up several sponsors, including South Beach Divers, Cubi-K Scooters and Peroni Nastro Azzurro, a premium Italian beer.

So why bowling? 'It brings people together, and it's something you can do and have fun with. This is not just about crying, 'Please help me walk.' It's about educating people and making them aware of the potential for cures."

Cohen, who operates her own one-woman advertising company, Sabco Productions, from her Miami Beach apartment, has other plans for fundraisers: a golf tournament, a poker tournament, a music tour of college campuses and a fashion show scheduled for September.

If anyone can get this off the ground, surely it's the 29-year-old who has endured several surgeries and countless hours of rehabilitation to work her way back from a 1992 accident that left her a quadriplegic.

"She gives a face to stem cell research," says Bernie Siegel, the lawyer who founded the Genetics Policy Institute, a nonprofit that advances stem cell research. Cohen has spoken at several institute functions and volunteers as the organization's public relations manager.

Adds Siegel: "She's one of the most extraordinary people I've met. I've never seen her wallow in self-pity, and she brings incredible professional skills to the cause. We couldn't find a better or more passionate spokesperson."

Cohen's mission seems deceptively simple: to increase awareness of the potential in stem cell research and to distribute the money she raises to top scientists in hopes of accelerating breakthroughs for paralysis and other diseases.

She knows this will not be easy. Stem cell research remains controversial, particularly for some religious conservatives because human embryos are used and destroyed in the process. (Stem cells are considered the building blocks of the body and are believed to hold the promise of repairing organs and treating diseases.)

President Bush has voiced concerns about the destruction of embryos during research, and federal funding has been limited to research on 22 embryonic stem cell lines that existed before August 2001.

Such federal limitations, however, have not stopped others from raising money to fund private research, and this is where Cohen hopes she can make a difference.

"My message is that this is not political," she says. "This is not Republican or Democrat. This is about the potential this science has."

When Cohen speaks to local and national groups, she points out that ethical scientists are against reproductive cloning (people's biggest fear), that there are 400,000 embryos that will be discarded anyway, that stem cells have the potential to treat more than 70 diseases and conditions.

"People are very inquisitive," she adds. 'I get a lot of, 'Oh, I didn't know that.' I think it's important to get

people to understand the science before they can support you."

One of her allies is Ryan O'Connor, 23, and a Type 1 diabetic. They met through Siegel, and together they are now working on the "SCREAM Tour" -- The Stem Cell Research for Every American -- that will bring musicians to college campuses to advocate for more research during the 2008 presidential campaign.

"She's so articulate and enthusiastic and motivated that just watching her makes you want to help," says O'Connor, who has played with a band in New York City.

Though she now comes across as a natural for the job, Cohen did not envision a future as an advocate. At the time of the accident, she was two months shy of 15, a good student and a popular swimmer. On Halloween night, she and four friends went out for the night in cars with two men she had never met. They began to drag race down Alton Road, and one car crashed into the BMW in which Cohen was riding. While her friends walked away with minor injuries, she was paralyzed.

At first she refused to leave her hospital room. With prodding from her parents, she began therapy and returned to school. When she graduated from Miami Beach High in 1995, her classmates gave her a standing ovation. She received the Principal's Cup, one of the school's highest honors. Etched on her award: "For Courage in the Face of Adversity."

That courage never wavered. She lived in dorms at the University of Miami, where a full-time assistant helped her with daily tasks, and in 1999 graduated with a double major, advertising and psychology. After additional training at the Miami Ad School, she eventually started her own company with several steady clients.

In 2004, in a meeting at the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis, she heard Siegel talk about stem cell research. She immediately recognized her calling. In 2005, she began her own line of "Get Stemmed" T-shirts, her first effort to get her peers, the MTV Generation, tuned in.

Along the way, she's recruited others, including Mona Cohen, a fellow advertising student who eventually married Sabrina's brother, David. Mona recently quit her advertising job to devote time to the foundation.

"She's extremely inspiring and it's very humbling to see all she's accomplished in spite of the obstacles she's had to overcome," Mona says. "I do this because I really believe in it and because I believe in her."

For Cohen, her advocacy work has given her a better understanding of what she is meant to do. It is her way of turning anger and confusion and fear of failure into something good.

"I feel like I've found my mission and purpose in life," she says. "I see my wheelchair now as a tool."