

A *Model* of Confidence

Shelly Baer inspires others with her talk, “The Beauty of Disability.”

Instead of parties, boyfriends and school sports, Shelly Baer’s teenage years in the late 1970s in Miami were marked by painful surgeries and months-long periods of recuperation. She had short arms and misshapen hands, hallmarks of juvenile arthritis (JA) before the era of biologic treatments.

“I never wanted to be in my body or look into a full-length mirror,” says Shelly, now 48, who developed symptoms at age 3.

She focused on earning her bachelor’s degree in psychology and special education from the University of Miami. But she watched with envy as her peers dated and socialized. Self-acceptance was a struggle.

A Transformation

With the help of a therapist, Shelly began shedding the belief that arthritis defined her.

“Having a chronic disease is an easy excuse for a lot of things – an excuse not to date, the reason for rejection,” she says. “But even with a disease, I can see myself whole and desirable, choose who I want to be with, not just wait for someone to choose me. That was my moment of empowerment – the realization that I am not a victim.”

Shelly transitioned slowly – her first date and kiss at age 25 and her own apartment a year later. She went on



Shelly Baer, who has juvenile arthritis, works to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

to earn her master’s degree at Yeshiva University’s Wurzweiler School of Social Work in Manhattan, then returned to Miami where she became a social worker at the University of Miami’s Miller School of Medicine, helping abused children, dysfunctional families and people with HIV.

By age 42 she was so self-assured she agreed to be photographed for a local exhibit of 22 nude (or scantily clad) women with disabilities.

“It was the most empowering, liberating experience of my life – the first step in shedding my invisibility,” she says.

A Powerful Voice

Shelly, who is engaged to be married this year, now coaches disabled people through dating and love challenges. She also speaks regularly to medical residents about the emotional aspects

of disability, and has advocated for people with arthritis through Arthritis Foundation events.

And last September at a TEDx conference in Miami (a regional version of the TED international speaker series), Shelly delivered her six-minute talk, “The Beauty of Disability.” She was the evening’s only speaker to receive a standing ovation.

“I wanted to get my voice, my message, my physical presence out there,” says Shelly. “As I walked off stage, I knew that I could do anything. It made me know that I have a strong message, that I’m here to expand minds and open hearts.” —JUDY ALEXANDRA DIEDWARDO

Learn more about Shelly’s story and link to her TEDx talk at [Arthritis Today.org/MJ12](https://www.ArthritisToday.org/MJ12).