



In 1991, on the heels of the Americans with Disabilities Act being signed into law, a grassroots effort began in Phoenix to remove the physical and attitudinal barriers that prohibited people with disabilities from enjoying all the benefits that nature-based recreation has to offer. This volunteer-driven effort was known as *River of Dreams* (ROD), and its first project was to partner with the Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department Adaptive Recreation Services to open the Grand Canyon to people with significant disabilities through whitewater rafting. The experience proved to have life-changing benefits for the participants and inspired a commitment to create similar accessible opportunities. In 1993, River of Dreams received its nonprofit 501(c)(3) status. One year later the River Rampage rafting program for teens with disabilities and their at-risk peers was launched, followed in 2001 by Daring Adventures, a year-round continuum of outdoor recreation activities that include camping, hiking, backpacking, kayaking, cross country skiing, sled ice hockey, cycling, and rock climbing - all adapted to meet the needs of individuals with significant disabilities.

In 2008 however, the economic downturn caused Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department to lose more than one third of its budget, forcing the closure of the Adaptive Recreation Services section in July 2009. Yet ROD's volunteers did not give up on their mission, "*To improve the quality of life for people with disabilities through the power of outdoor recreation.*" Since then, River of Dreams has worked to continue to provide adaptive outdoor recreation opportunities to youth and adults with disabilities living in the Phoenix metropolitan area. The recent opening of the Virginia G. Piper Sports & Fitness Center for Persons with Disabilities (SpoFit) has created a new partnership that has the potential to restore, grow, and sustain adaptive outdoor recreation opportunities for people with disabilities for the long-term.

*I think probably that the number one problem amongst the disabled population is a general lack of information access and networking. Information on everything from recreational opportunities to accessible housing has been instrumental in getting me out into the world and enjoying life again following my stroke...I remember one day on the river trip when we were just floating along and everything was so vibrant and breathtakingly beautiful and perfect, and I thought about how lucky we really are. I mean, you get home and you have to deal with your disability, but when you're on the river in the Canyon, all that disappears and you just think: it's a wonderful life no matter how you have to go through it.*

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Susan, Grand Canyon rafter

*But there is always a limit - things I can't do, places I can't go. ☐ People who don't feel comfortable with me...Here, I'm hiking along a ledge, sleeping on a rock...This trip is without limits...*

- Kelly, Daring Adventure backpacker and Cataract Canyon rafter

River rafting, in a sense, is really "River Renewal". It's a fresh start - or a jump start. It's an opportunity to see people as we should rather than through an artificial screen. Together we coax the best out of each other and it takes more time for some. That's ok. It's not about judgment; it's about understanding - ourselves our place in nature. So tonight I'll miss my bed, but I'm glad to trade it in for a star drenched night sky. And tomorrow I'll miss my car, and some of my routines, but today I got to paddle a kayak through 8 Foot Rapid with Erin. The rest of the world should be so lucky! - Eric, River Rampage volunteer

