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Kenguru President Stacy Zoern meets with President Barack Obama May 2013. (PRNewsFoto/KLD Energy Technologies)

Growing up with a rare form of muscular dystrophy and unable to walk, entrepreneur Stacy Zoern faces obstacles most people do not even perceive.

What may seem like a simple choice for a coffee stop or a social outing takes strategic planning, public transportation can be dubious and architectural barriers abound.

But those lessons in perseverance and necessitated innovation enabled her to achieve her goals and they hold important insight into the homeland security enterprise. Zoern shared her experience with a Center for Homeland Defense and Security master's degree class June 15.

"Growing up with a disability and facing those obstacles on a daily basis really set me up in life for having a persevering mentality that has not only helped me achieve the goals that I have set for myself but also for the life of an entrepreneur," Zoern said following a presentation and discussion with the Special Topics and Homeland Security course.

A published author by age 22, Zoern earned her undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Texas before entering a successful legal career that included practicing patent law and clerking for a federal judge. The barriers of daily life create what she calls "inconvenient disruptions" to be surmounted, but have also inspired her vision for a new product to ease the lives of millions who use wheelchairs.

In 2010 she founded Community Cars, now called Kenguru, a firm to produce an electric vehicle called for the road which enables wheelchair users to enter the car through a rear hatchback and drive without ever leaving their own chair. Traits developed navigating life proved valuable in the business world.

"It is a very scary and risky endeavor but when you are doing something you are passionate about it makes it all worth it," Zoern said. "I'm really lucky because the project I'm working on is something that is going to impact and improve the lives of potentially millions of people all over the world who are having the same physical limitations that

I have. That's hugely motivating."

Zoern epitomizes the "never sound retreat" attitude which is a catalyst for changing the world, refusing to accept limitations imposed by nature or society, said CHDS instructor Kathleen Kiernan.

"She has now illuminated that spark in our CHDS community and it will become a contagion of change," Kiernan said.

Lessons learned are directly applicable to the homeland security enterprise. Zoern said examining failures and why they happened are critical to success, as is listening to input from others and seeking different approaches.

"In order to do that I really think you have to take your ego out of it," she observed. "When you choose a path, you put your name on it and it doesn't work, you really have to be willing to say, 'OK that was a bad idea and I'm going to try this other idea somebody else had that I didn't think was going to work.'"

A critical takeaway message was the importance of ensuring all stakeholders of a community are represented when crafting policies and procedures, said Dominique Tarpey, Section Chief, Behavior Detection and Analysis, Transportation Security Administration.

"As policy makers in the homeland security realm we tend to shy away from disruptions, but they could provide that 'a-ha moment' to turn a road block into an opportunity," Tarpey said.

The presentation illustrated the concepts nurtured in the CHDS classroom of widening one's aperture and seeking out alternative views on issues, said student Frank Leeb, a Battalion Chief with the New York City Fire Department.

"This cohort has 28 people from different disciplines and we are the people that can help with the issues that face those who are disabled," Leeb said. "Many of us had never even given that any consideration. She brought awareness to it."

New York Police Department Assistant Chief Kathleen O'Reilly said the presentation was one that was sorely needed in the homeland security realm.

"I think we need to hear that no matter what difficulties you face in life you can overcome them," O'Reilly said. "That's her message, one of hope. We do what we do because we care, so her message is important. That message of giving back is relevant to all our fields"

Part of Zoern's hope is that people charged with public policy can garner greater insights into the barriers faced by part of the population they serve and affect change at their agencies and in their communities.

"When able bodied people can really get comfortable with disability and not view it as something to be feared but view it as a different part of the human experience, the barriers will start to come down," Zoern said.

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