LIFE ON WHEELS

A Life of Advocacy, Grounded in Faith and Family:
The Work of Sharifa Abu-Hamda

WRITTEN BY: Rosa Latimer

"I'm not the type to give up," Sharifa Abu-Hamda said when we spoke recently.

She wasn't being dramatic. She was simply stating her personal baseline: steady and matter of fact. The Brooklyn-based advocate speaks calmly and listens closely. That quiet determination has guided her for decades, fueling work that ranges from one-on-one peer support to the slow grind of policy advocacy. She has learned how to live within systems that were not built with people with disabilities in mind and to push those systems to do better.

Abu-Hamda has limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, a progressive genetic condition. She has used a power wheelchair for many years, though she remembers a time when she could walk short distances. Now 50, she manages the Independent Living Program peer mentoring program at Independence Care System, a New York-based organization serving adults with physical disabilities and complex health needs.

She also works occasionally with Wheeling Forward, which supports people adjusting to a recent disability who may lack resources. In addition, she co-leads the Civics League for Disability Rights, an advocacy group focused on policy change and healthcare access.

Sharifa Abu-Hamda at the Dome of the Rock in Old Jerusalem during a visit with her family in Palestine.

Abu-Hamda's days may look very different from one another, but her focus never wavers. She might help a member prepare for a job fair, troubleshoot healthcare barriers or meet with state officials to discuss Medicaid policy. The tasks change, but the goal remains the same: Ensuring people with disabilities are heard before decisions are made for them.

That goal has been shaped by family support, personal setbacks, faith and years of learning what it takes to claim agency in environments that do not automatically offer it.

Born in New York City to Palestinian parents, Abu-Hamda spent much of her childhood there. She also spent summers in Palestine and lived there with her family during her late teens and early adulthood.

"Life there is so very different," she said. "The experience brought me closer to my family and helped me understand Palestinian traditions in a deeper way."

Abu-Hamda's experience at Pace University in New York marked an important step toward independence. Despite accessibility barriers and being the only wheelchair user in her residence hall, she earned a Bachelor of Business Administration in public accounting.

The experience taught her a lesson she often shares with others: "No one is going to get what you need for you."

For Abu-Hamda, independence means agency: living life on her own terms and speaking for herself.

"Independence doesn't mean doing everything alone," she said. "Many people with disabilities work, live independently, and some manage large families."

She emphasizes the importance of self-advocacy because she has seen firsthand that people with disabilities are often underestimated and their autonomy overlooked. Receptionists may direct questions to caregivers rather than to the wheelchair user, and healthcare providers may assume someone else should answer.

"These moments shift focus away from the individual's autonomy," she said.

Abu-Hamda describes her home life as "fortunate." The oldest of seven children, she grew up in a family that expected her to pursue education, advocate for herself and remain engaged with the world around her.

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Sharifa Abu-Hamda (center) with four of her siblings — she is the oldest of seven — in their hometown of Beit Hanina, Palestine, in 2023.

Sharifa Abu-Hamda with her friend and supporter, Jean Minkel, at the Forging a Path Toward Integrated Care for Dually Eligible Beneficiaries Conference at the University of Pennsylvania in July 2024.

Her father encouraged her to strive for independence. That support did not eliminate barriers, but it shaped her approach: persistence and determination.

She is candid about the slow pace of change in public attitudes and policies affecting people with disabilities. One of her ongoing concerns is the lack of specialized health care models for adults with physical disabilities. She advocates for a more coordinated approach that recognizes complex needs rather than forcing people into systems that do not fit.

Abu-Hamda continues to meet with state officials and healthcare leaders in New York, but progress can be slow. "The system is exhausting when you feel like it's not listening," she said. "Sometimes it feels like the fight is never going to be over."

When the work feels relentless, Abu-Hamda turns to faith, a practice strengthened by her family's support.

Three decades ago, a fall left her with a broken leg and depression she had not anticipated. At the time, she could still walk, but the injury intensified her fears about the future. Her aunt sent her a copy of the Quran, a gesture that felt both spiritual and practical.

Reading it, Abu-Hamda said, changed her perspective. The Quran, Islam's holy book, helped her work through her depression and regain a sense of purpose.

Since then, prayer and reflection have remained steady sources of support.

"Reading the Quran helps me see life differently and steadies everything I do," she said.

That steadiness shows in her work at Independence Care System, where she oversees a peer mentoring program that supports members pursuing goals such as employment, social engagement and healthcare navigation.

Some mentoring relationships last only a few months, while others continue for more than a year. Often, the support is hands-on and practical. Other times, it simply means being present: accompanying someone in an unfamiliar setting, helping to calm anxieties or supporting them through situations they might otherwise avoid.

"Peer support works," Abu-Hamda said, "because it is rooted in lived experience. When you know that someone else understands what you're going through, navigating life is easier."

Her belief in peer support comes from personal experience. Abu-Hamda credits Independence Care System with helping her become more independent by connecting her with services and support that improved her daily life.

Last year, for example, the organization's women's health and primary care team helped her receive her first mammogram by locating an accessible provider, assisting with wheelchair positioning and providing physical support during the exam.

Another milestone was obtaining a customized wheelchair, which increased her mobility and independence.

"Because of (Independence Care System), I became more independent," she said. "I got the right wheelchair. I was able to move on my own and not rely on others to push me around."

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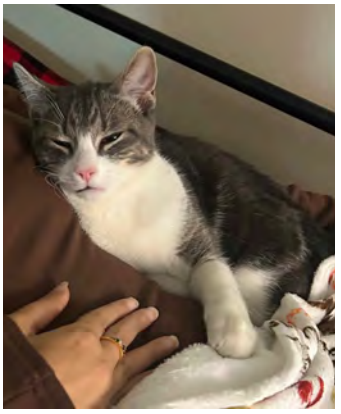
Sharifa Abu-Hamda is surrounded by work colleagues celebrating her 50th birthday in March 2026.

Sharif Abu-Hamda and Marcus Johnson co-lead a Civics League meeting in New York.



Murjan, a very contented cat, is being held by its person, Sharifa Abu-Hamda.

Outside of work, Abu-Hamda enjoys reading, shopping, attending concerts, visiting parks and taking day trips with her aunt, whom she describes as her closest friend. They sometimes travel to Pennsylvania or New Jersey for a change of scenery.

She intentionally maintains a balanced pace, recognizing that advocacy requires endurance and that rest helps sustain her efforts.

If a newly disabled person were seeking advice, Abu-Hamda would encourage them to build community.

"Community is essential," she said. "Connect with organizations and people who share your experiences. Learn from people who understand the practical and emotional realities of disability. Don't isolate yourself. Reach out, ask questions and get involved. You are never alone."

For Abu-Hamda, connection is the foundation of independence and the force that fuels her advocacy for access, respect and meaningful participation in decisions that affect people with disabilities.

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Sharifa Abu-Hamda is a New York City-based disability advocate who leads the Independent Living Program at Independence Care System and serves as administrative manager at Wheeling Forward, an organization that supports people adjusting to a recent disability. She holds a Bachelor of Business Administration in public accounting from Pace University in New York and credits her faith and family with sustaining her commitment to advocacy and service.

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