# Craig H. Neilsen Foundation Media Kit

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# About Us

The Craig H. Neilsen Foundation is the largest private funder of spinal cord injury research, rehabilitation, clinical training, and programmatic support in the United States and Canada. The Foundation partners with scientific, charitable and educational organizations conducting spinal cord injury research, training in spinal cord medicine, and supports grassroots organizations providing services to assist individuals affected by spinal cord injury. Drawing ongoing inspiration from its founder, the Foundation is dedicated to a future where individuals with spinal cord injuries live full and productive lives as active participants in their communities.

## Our Vision

Individuals with spinal cord injuries, and those who care for them, live full and productive lives as active participants in their communities.

## Our Mission

Craig H. Neilsen Foundation’s funding is dedicated to supporting both programs and scientific research to improve the quality of life for those affected by and living with spinal cord injury.

## Our Founder (Condensed)

Craig H. Neilsen was an American entrepreneur well known for his attention to detail, uncompromising demand for excellence, and an ability to inspire those around him. In his personal life, he was also known for his generosity and led by example with his charitable giving. In 1985, a collision with a semi-truck left Craig with a severe spinal cord injury (SCI), and in 2002, he applied his entrepreneurial spirit to his charitable pursuits and established the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation to improve the quality of life for people living with SCI.

Our work is inspired by our Founder, who overcame barriers during his lifetime to live a life that exceeded all expectations, empowered others to do the same, and created this organization to impact the field today and expand solutions for tomorrow.

# Our Founder (Full Text)

****Craig H. Neilsen (1941-2006) was an American entrepreneur known for his attention to detail, uncompromising demand for excellence, and an ability to inspire those around him. In his personal life, he became known for his generosity, leading by example with his charitable giving. In 1985, a collision with a semi-truck left Craig with a severe spinal cord injury (SCI). His life experience following his injury motivated him to improve the quality of life for other people living with SCI. He established the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation in 2002 to pursue his philanthropic goals, devoting the same entrepreneurial spirit to the Foundation that made him so successful in business.

Craig journeyed through life with extraordinary focus and determination. He was born in Logan, Utah, and grew up in Twin Falls, Idaho, where he spent the majority of his adulthood. He attended Utah State University, earning an undergraduate degree in political science and he received his MBA (1964) and JD (1967) from the University of Utah. Craig’s early career spanned law and the construction and real estate development industries.

His accident in 1985 forced him to instantly transform his personal life and his business. He was quadriplegic with only minimal function in his left hand and required around-the-clock nursing and assistance with daily activities for the rest of his life. Nonetheless, his tenacity and extraordinary focus fueled his determination to succeed. In reflecting on his life following the accident shortly before his death, Craig recalled, “I was forced to engage and get some things accomplished because I had my family depending on me. I think most people – when push comes to shove – take their hard knocks and then pick up the pieces and go on.” Craig returned to business in 1986 after his rehabilitation and achieved exponentially greater success in his career after his injury than before.

In 1987, only two years after his accident, he engineered the buyout of two other shareholders to gain full control of two small, roadside casinos on the Nevada-Idaho border and proceeded to redevelop and expand the properties into a casino resort complex. The combination of Craig’s drive and the relaxation of state gambling restrictions around the country a few years later, fueled the rapid expansion of his casino company, Ameristar Casinos, Inc., following its 1993 initial public offering. Although many competitors sought to take advantage of the proliferation of gaming by developing basic facilities, Craig’s vision for Ameristar called for properties of architectural distinction with modern, spacious casino floors, a wide range of dining options, luxury hotel rooms and live entertainment. Through his keen attention to detail, every property Ameristar developed and operated had to meet Craig’s exacting and continuously more demanding standards of excellence. As a result, Ameristar achieved a market-leading position in each of its markets and continued to blaze new trails until Craig’s death in 2006.

Craig’s charitable pursuits grew along with his company. As he met other individuals with spinal cord injuries, he became inspired to begin funding small projects to help the SCI community. He was dedicated to creating a future for individuals with SCI to live full and productive lives as active participants in their communities, like he was able to do. But in his true entrepreneurial spirit, he wanted to go bigger. He knew he could do more.

The wealth Craig generated in business gave him the financial opportunity to seed the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation, which he founded in 2002 to help advance spinal cord injury causes. Craig’s estate plan positioned the Foundation to grow as rapidly as Ameristar did. The Foundation received an approximately $470 million endowment from the sale of Ameristar stock in 2011 and promptly ramped up its strategic planning, staffing and grant making to achieve Craig’s objectives. The Foundation has grown to become the largest private funder of SCI research, rehabilitation, clinical training, and programmatic support in the United States and Canada.

Due to Craig’s leadership and generosity, the Foundation’s work has both breadth and depth and plays a key role in fostering advancement on many fronts of the SCI field. Initial funding focused on basic research, student scholarships, and support for nonprofits providing services for individuals living with spinal cord injuries, with each of these programs expanding with the increase in the Foundation’s financial resources. Today, the Foundation also focuses on support for identified gaps in service, training the next generation of SCI physicians, and research to address the psychosocial impacts of spinal cord injuries. Although the Foundation does not normally invest in capital projects, it was the lead donor for the Craig H. Neilsen Rehabilitation Hospital at the University of Utah, Craig’s alma mater. The hospital opened its doors in June 2020, serving the Mountain West region with a modern and innovative facility

In the words of his son, Ray Neilsen, “Though my dad’s lifestyle had been altered considerably after his accident, his ambition intensified. For the next two decades, his vision, entrepreneurial spirit, and inexhaustible passion only escalated.”

Craig lived a full and prosperous life post-injury, one that exceeded all expectations. The Craig H. Neilsen Foundation brings his spirit of resiliency and drive for greatness to everything the Foundation touches to improve the lives of those affected by SCI.

# Leadership

## Ray H. Neilsen, Co-Trustee and Chairman of the Board

Ray Neilsen was appointed as Co-Trustee and Chairman of the Board of the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation upon the passing of his father, Craig H. Neilsen in 2006. In these roles, Ray is actively involved in overseeing the investment of the Foundation’s assets; determining the strategic direction, budget and allocation of the Foundation’s grantmaking activities; establishing procedures for the objective review and assessment of grant applications; approving staffing plans; and, overseeing the Foundation staff in the implementation of its grant programs.

In addition to his work with the Foundation, Ray is the President of Neilsen and Company, a real estate development company responsible for a number of major commercial, residential, educational and municipal buildings. Originally founded and operated by his grandfather in the 1960s and led by his dad for the next three decades, Ray continues the Neilsen family legacy of creating exceptional real estate projects. Neilsen and Company is developing projects ranging from hotels and restaurants to mixed use projects in various roles from investor-partner to co-owner.

Ray’s professional career began as a busboy at Ameristar Casinos, Inc., the company founded by Craig H. Neilsen. His father insisted Ray immerse himself in and learn about all levels of the organization, so he worked through the ranks and was with the company for 20 years. Ultimately, Ray served as Chairman of the Board of Directors, as well as Senior Vice President and Board Co- Chairman and Vice President of Operations and Special Projects.

Ray earned a Bachelor of Science degree in history from the College of Idaho and a Master’s in Business Administration from the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

## Gordon R. KanofskyGordon R. Kanofsky, Co-Trustee and Board Member

Gordy Kanofsky has been actively involved as an advisory board member of the Foundation since its inception in 2002 and was appointed as a member of the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation’s Board of Directors in 2006.

Gordy was the Chief Executive Officer (June 2008-August 2013) and a member of the Board of Directors (November 2006-August 2013) of Ameristar Casinos, Inc., the company founded by Craig H. Neilsen. He previously served, as Vice-Chairman of the Board, Co-Chairman of the Board, Executive Vice President and Senior Vice President of Legal Affairs since he joined the company in 1999. Prior to this, he served as Ameristar’s outside general counsel since 1998 and its securities counsel since 1993, when he was retained to represent Ameristar in connection with its initial public offering.

Gordy was in private practice as a corporate and securities lawyer in Washington, DC and Los Angeles for 20 years before joining Ameristar. He became a partner in Hughes Hubbard & Reed in 1989 and later became a shareholder in Sanders, Barnet, Goldman, Simons & Mosk.

Gordy has served on the Board of Directors of the American Gaming Association, in various volunteer leadership positions for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, and as the Chairman of the Los Angeles chapter of the Washington University Alumni Association.

He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree, magna cum laude, from Washington University in St. Louis, majoring in history. Gordy earned his law degree, with honors, from Duke University.

## Kym Eisner, Executive Director

As the Executive Director of the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation, Kym is responsible for the organization’s day-to-day management, consistent with the mission, values and long-range strategic plan of the Foundation. Kym works with the Co-Trustees and Board of Directors on the vision of the organization as set forth by Craig H. Neilsen. She provides leadership in strategic planning and all operational areas, ensuring the development of innovative and effective programming.

Kym has more than 20 years of hands-on non-profit leadership experience, with specific emphases on strategic planning, budgeting, managing board relationships, team-building, communications, marketing/branding and fundraising. Kym holds an undergraduate degree from the University of California, Riverside and a Masters in Fine Arts and Non-Profit Management from UCLA.

## Naomi Kleitman, PhDNaomi Kleitman, PhD, Senior Vice President of Grants and Research

Dr. Naomi Kleitman serves as the Senior Vice President of Grants and Research, overseeing the Foundation’s research portfolios, as well as providing strategic guidance on all grant programs for the organization. She is based in Maryland, near Washington, DC.

From 2001-2012, Naomi served as a Program Director at the National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, administering a portfolio of grants and contracts in spinal cord injury (SCI) research aimed at developing successful strategies for nervous system repair and restoration of function. She also focused on translation of fundamental research on spinal cord and peripheral neural repair into clinical studies that apply these basic principles, and the development of rigorous standards for preclinical and translational SCI research. Naomi has participated on numerous NIH and interagency groups, as a Federal Liaison to SCI research programs at the Departments of Defense, Veterans Administration and several non-federal agencies, and was co-lead for the NIH/NINDS-FDA/CBER working group.

Naomi was a faculty member of the University of Miami School of Medicine in The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis from 1989-2001, studying mechanisms of axonal regeneration in tissue culture and the development of populations of adult rodent and human Schwann cells for transplantation in peripheral and central nervous system injury sites. She also served as the Scientific Liaison for The Miami Project, encouraging interaction between clinicians, rehabilitation and basic researchers, as well as informing the public, patient groups, and the media about progress in SCI research.

# Grant Examples

## Craig Hospital

*Providing Community Reintegration:* The Community Reintegration program promotes return-to-work for individuals with SCI and focuses on vocational and academic achievement, fostering employment readiness, placement, retention, and self-advocacy as a means to address the need for accommodations. Access to transportation is another significant barrier to returning to work, but Craig Hospital addresses this by including driver evaluations and/or training in their program.

## Kessler Foundation

*Re-Entering Life: Web-Based Intervention for Partner Caregivers of People with Spinal Cord Injury*: Partners who take on a caregiver role for a loved one with SCI struggle with feelings of grief. Life Reentry, a six-week online grief counseling intervention, was developed to provide strategies for people who experience a major loss to help overcome grief, build well-being, and life satisfaction. This research study will test the feasibility and acceptability of Life Reentry counseling for caregiving partners in the SCI community.

## RespectAbility

*Fighting Stigma, Increasing Access and Fostering Community in Hollywood:* This program addresses the harmful stigma and implicit bias toward people with SCI within the film and television industry, and the poor employment outcomes within the entertainment industry for Californians with SCI. RespectAbility creates workforce opportunities and promotes accurate images and storytelling in film, television, and the media to amplify the importance of disability inclusion and heightened awareness of the capabilities of people with SCI and other disabilities.

## University of Nevada, Las Vegas

*Eliminating Barriers for Students with SCI:* The Foundation has been in partnership with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and other universities to support students with SCI in their pursuit of higher education and eliminate barriers to their academic success.For example, a 2018 recipient of the Neilsen Scholarship was completing his rehab in another state when he was introduced to a tight-knit community of wheelchair rugby players. Upon returning back home to Las Vegas, however, he realized that neither a wheelchair rugby team nor community existed in his hometown. This led him to start his own nonprofit, the High Rollers Adaptive Sports Foundation dedicated to building a supportive community for the disabled by promoting and expanding adaptive sports opportunities in Las Vegas. Using their personal experiences, the High Rollers provide inpatient outreach to newly injured individuals. Offering a listening ear, support, and a backpack full of resources to help ease the transition for those who have sustained permanently disabling injuries.

## The Veterans Research Foundation of Pittsburgh

*Providing Higher Education Opportunities in STEM:* Undergraduate students with SCI who are interested in STEM programs can participate in an intensive summer program at the University of Pittsburgh Human Engineering and Research Laboratories (HERL). This program is designed to inspire students to pursue advanced degrees in STEM fields as a means to address the lack of SCI professionals in research, engineering, medicine, and academia. A total of six students participated in an immersive ten-week course of study at HERL, working with scientists and engineers who are also living with SCI. The program culminates with each student submitting a thesis and participating in an open house event with poster presentations and an award ceremony.

## Washington University in St. Louis

*Improving Wheelchairs and Wheelchair Training:* Most people with SCI depend on manual wheelchairs for mobility, but propelling their chairs puts significant strain on their shoulders. Pushing a wheelchair as recommended, using ideal propulsion mechanics, can protect a person’s joints, which is important because even minor errors will result in shoulder pain and injury over time. Patients often do not receive adequate training and practice with these skills before leaving an acute care facility. This randomized study worked to identify how much practice is needed and what type of surface conditions (over ground or practicing on rollers) are best to provide adequate wheelchair propulsion training.

# [Recent News](https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/covid-news-craig-h-neilsen-foundation-donates-nearly-10m-in-crisis-funding-to-spinal-cord-injury-communities-and-critical-research-301098493.html)

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**COVID NEWS: Craig H. Neilsen Foundation Donates Nearly $10M in Crisis Funding to Spinal Cord Injury Communities and Critical Research**

*The new crisis funding structure delivers grants to the community quickly and effectively, and can be used as a model for other philanthropic foundations*

**Encino, CA** -- Today, the [Craig H. Neilsen Foundation](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bTpXbVgEJ2VFs-G8aRgiiA70yg8i27MEmo_ewcBZZsHJzMFRqkwyJyaKSve22Eb2l3rMK6ddUXuzfFcIX75FB4A~~), the largest private funder of spinal cord injury research, education, clinical training and programmatic support in the U.S. and Canada, announced that it has allocated close to $10 million in emergency grant funding to support the spinal cord injury (SCI) community and critical research amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The Neilsen Foundation is dedicated to a future where people with SCI can live full and productive lives as active participants in our communities,” said Kym Eisner, Executive Director of the Foundation. “That requires providing immediate, emergency funding to meet their needs during the pandemic, while maintaining our long-term investments in the future.”

This crisis has presented many challenges for the SCI community. People with SCI are [disproportionately affected](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bQCvGRpa0brcDomXni3p0ZzhAlkFfurrAEy-AOiWDAInpQvdJ8DJxi_tEL8EDOeKcUSNpzrNcWFdc_BUcNC2rnuffnhp3_T5TiBIjWpSKzPqv7cDY2TTa4sP5lhWs3PbL9RVO0A4mhyYELofqT1_3_llmaAB05TCtoxp5IJoykhU~) by COVID-19. They are at a [high risk](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bbbkkM5llkjH_ZN8aF7O51RO5YKwKz-foG754417ec5EuP6ZeT0eyl2g8dLI9tVuhuJU2zITjfgOFz62z_3gQBpzNSQyUFrce537TdtvahPrG5BGxe8SUuX7tgaeScqXqzcdxv3NieBHDzu_Jf1IpGw7oMQbtwTD5EOEtteZWKt0~) of catching the virus, are more likely to experience a critical version of the virus, and many cannot fully socially distance as they rely on outside caregivers to support them in their daily life. Additionally, important SCI research projects have been halted or delayed and will incur additional costs required for the measures needed to return to work.

“People with SCI are facing increased risks in addition to a shortage of home- and community-based services, personal care attendants, and health care options,” said James Weisman, President and CEO of United Spinal. “The safety and well-being of this community is our highest priority and with these grants we’re proud that we can help alleviate their challenges.”

To meet these complicated challenges, the Foundation created a new crisis funding structure -- one that other philanthropic foundations can use as a model -- that couples immediate needs with long-term support. The immediate funding provided is based on historically good stewardship of Foundation funds coupled with the willingness to trust their grantees, meaning organizations can access the funds without the usual reporting requirements so they can focus on delivering care quickly.

The Foundation is distributing the funding to current and past grantees by invitation only through:

1. Emergency grants ($3.5 million) to grassroots, non-profit organizations across the U.S. and Canada, including $1 million in funding to United Spinal to get essential services and supplies to people (e.g. grocery delivery PPE telehealth). Some stories of these grantees are below.
2. Research grants ($6.1 million) for projects that have been delayed, put on hold or otherwise impacted. This funding helps cover the cost of delays and the measures that will need to be taken as people return to work (e.g. sanitation processes, testing and PPE).

To learn more about the Neilsen Foundation and its work, please visit [https://chnfoundation.org/](%20https:/chnfoundation.org/).

**Stories of Emergency Grantees**

* **Northeast OH:** When the pandemic struck, wheelchair basketball games and power soccer games at Adaptive Sports Program of Ohio came to a halt but the teamwork didn’t. The coaches are delivering groceries and essential supplies to the athletes, which is both keeping the coaches employed and providing a critical service. These deliveries saved one athlete and his family from taking potentially dangerous trips to the grocery store and allowed him more time to focus on his physical therapy practice so he can protect himself.
* **Houston, TX:** Without adequate protective equipment, local residents with SCI are putting themselves at risk every time their caregivers come to their homes and for many, caregiver support is essential to daily life. United Spinal Houston is helping them stay safe and stay at home by delivering kits with essential health products, including KN95 masks, gloves and hand sanitizer.
* **Kansas City, MO:** Physical therapy and occupational therapy is critical and people need to be able to continue it at home, but many insurance providers, including Medicaid and Medicare, don't cover telehealth for these services. A clinic in Kansas City has helped cover the cost. Ability KC launched telehealth services in response to the pandemic and the grants from Neilsen help bridge the cost gap so that Ability can keep providing therapy to their clients, even if it has to be done over video and they have to swap soup cans and brooms for actual gym equipment.

**About the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation**

The Craig H. Neilsen Foundation is the largest private funder of spinal cord injury research, rehabilitation, clinical training, and programmatic support in the United States and Canada, and draws ongoing inspiration from its founder. The Foundation partners with scientific, charitable and educational organizations conducting spinal cord injury research, training in spinal cord medicine, and supports grassroots organizations providing services to assist individuals affected by spinal cord injury. The Foundation is dedicated to a future where individuals with spinal cord injuries live full and productive lives as active participants in their communities.

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# [Craig H. Neilsen Rehabilitation Hospital at the University of Utah](https://healthcare.utah.edu/locations/neilsen-physical-rehab-hospital/)

## About the Hospital

On June 1, 2020, the Craig H. Neilsen Rehabilitation Hospital opened at Craig H. Neilsen’s alma mater, the University of Utah.

The 75-bed hospital is one of the most advanced rehabilitation facilities in the nation and the foremost destination in the Mountain West for patients recovering from and adjusting to life-altering injuries and conditions. The state-of-the-art hospital was made possible thanks to a $47.5 million donation from the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation.

The hospital features state-of-the-art rehabilitation services, including:

* **Smart-technology patient rooms –** Every patient room is fully customizable to an individual’s needs— with tech to encourage activity and promote independence.
* **State-of-the-art gym** –A spacious gym supports both physical and occupational therapy exercise regiments and includes an advanced Zero-G track to help patients regain mobility and learn to walk again.
* **Mobility garage** – The hospital is the only one in the nation with a multi-function garage to help patients learn how to use a wide range of mobility devices — from cars and off-road wheelchairs to hand-powered bicycles.
* **Outdoor therapy terrace and garden** – An invigorating outdoor therapy terrace and the tranquil Beth Hersh Goldsmith garden will host outdoor functionality training in a picturesque Salt Lake Valley environment
* **Digital innovation lab** – It features a mechanical and bioengineering lab where scientists and engineers will work to improve robotic and prosthetic technologies for replacing lost limbs and organ function.

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