

Reconnecting:

relationship advice from wheelchair users



Personal short stories on
friends, family & loved ones.

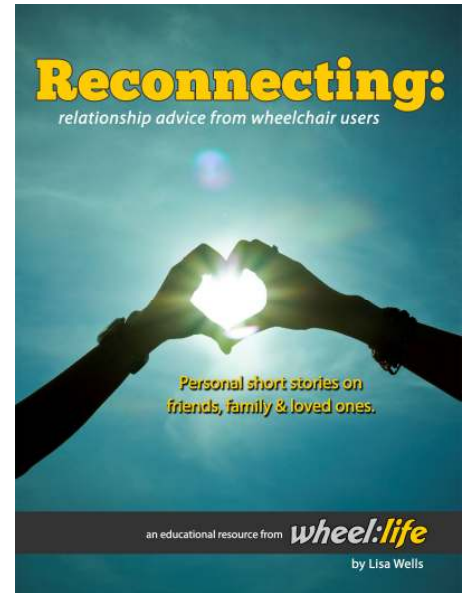
an educational resource from **wheel:life**

by Lisa Wells

Reconnecting: Relationship Advice from Wheelchair Users
a Wheel:Life publication
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What You'll Discover inside This Book

Wheel:Life publications center on sharing resources and support for people who use wheelchairs. In this book, you'll hear from six people who use wheelchairs as they share their perspective on friends, family and relationships including dating, marriage and parenting.

Throughout the book, Lisa Wells shares real-life examples and success stories from her interactions with disability advocates, non-profit supporters and Wheel:Life members throughout a healthcare marketing career that spans more than 20 years on three continents.



Lisa Wells

Why does this book cost \$1.99?

Simple. We are relying on the sale of this resource through Amazon.com to help fund other Wheel:Life programs that benefit the wheelchair community we serve. However, if money is an issue – please send us a note at <http://wheel-life.org/free-book-series/> and we will gladly forward a free .PDF copy to you.

For less than two dollars, you'll find that each chapter of this book provides easily-relatable examples of real life situations that are common for friends who use wheelchairs. Throughout the book, Wells offers stories of personal success from individuals who use wheelchairs.

Reconnecting is an easy, encouraging read that will help you improve and explore all kinds of personal relationships, whether you are new to using a wheelchair or a seasoned pro. Because when it comes to relationships, we all need a little advice every now and then.

So what are you waiting for? The first step to getting connected with new friends and family is to get started on Chapter 1.

Foreword: Thank You to Our Readers and Sponsors

You may wonder how Wheel:Life is able to run a community website, offer free motivational giveaways, run several social media pages and publish books like this for you to use as an educational resource? Well, we couldn't do it alone, that's for sure.

First, we wouldn't have a reason to keep plugging away every day if it wasn't for our readers. Thank you for being one of them! We hope that you'll find value in Wheel:Life resources and that they will help you in your daily life.

If you would like to stay connected with Wheel:Life and receive updates on a regular basis when we publish new resources and articles on our main website, send us a note at: <http://wheel-life.org/contact-us/> and we'll add you to our free monthly e-newsletter list.

Or, feel free to follow us on social media at:

- Facebook – <https://www.facebook.com/wheellifeonline>
- Twitter – www.twitter.com/wheellifeonline



Second, a group of fantastic organizations have come together to sponsor the Wheel:Life community. They are helping to fund all of the resources that you'll find on our main website [<http://www.wheel-life.org>] as well as those on our connected social media pages.

Thank you to all of the sponsors below for joining Wheel:Life in our effort to support people who use wheelchairs, worldwide. **To become a Wheel:Life sponsor, please contact us for details at: <http://wheel-life.org/contact-us/>**



ABC Medical is a national leader in providing urological and other medical supplies, delivered directly to customers' homes. ABC stands for Adapt.Believe.Compete., representing the Company's mission of providing people with disabilities unparalleled support to adapt to their situation, believe in themselves and compete every day.

As the exclusive medical supply sponsor of many of the largest adaptive sports organization in the U.S., ABC Medical supports and attends over 300 adaptive sports events every year, attended by over 20,000 athletes. In addition, ABC Medical has developed an exclusive network of hundreds of adaptive sports organizations and resources throughout the United States, available to the communities it serves. To learn more about a unique company that is Doing Well by Doing Good, call 866-897-8588 or visit us at www.abc-med.com.



Now in six cities across the nation, each **Abilities Expo** offers three days of access to the latest technologies and resources for ALL disabilities, informative workshops on issues that most resonate with the Community and fun activities like adaptive sports, dance, assistive animal demos and more. Come to the Expo! Get your free pass at www.abilitiesexpo.com.



The Cure Commitment is unsurpassed in the industry. Only Cure Medical has committed to donating 10% of net income to scientific research for spinal cord injury. Only Cure Medical catheters are DEHP and BPA free. Simply by using new Cure Catheters® or Cure Catheter® Closed Systems for routine intermittent catheterization, you take part in the sustained pursuit of a cure. Learn more at www.curemedical.com.

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SPORTS 'N SPOKES is a bimonthly publication produced by the Paralyzed Veterans of America. S'NS reports on competitive sports and recreation for wheelchair users. Since 1975, S'NS has been a leader in wheelchair sports coverage and currently goes to more than 43 countries worldwide. Our readers come from all walks of life all having one thing in common: determination! SPORTS 'N SPOKES is committed to providing a voice for the wheelchair sporting and recreation community. Visit **www.sportsnspokes.com** to view the latest issue.

Chapter 1: The Value of Reconnecting

One of the most common questions we hear within the Wheel:Life community when someone begins using a wheelchair is “How do I connect with friends and loved ones again?” It’s understandable that you may feel disconnected. Your whole life has taken a turn. You’re rolling instead of walking and that makes your perspective – literally – different. And it’s natural to feel like people are looking at you differently too. The truth is, they are. You are on a new level for them and it’s different than the one they remember.

REMEMBER THIS: Where you go on that new level is up to you.

You can choose to stay in your house, avoiding people and new places and situations. You can be mad at the world. You can feel like your friends have left you and you can blame that on the wheelchair. For some people, that may be true. They may have a hard time adjusting to the new you and they find it easier to leave instead.

The truth though is that most people are either drawn to you or pushed away from you by one thing – and it’s not the wheelchair. It’s your attitude. You can’t control how you get around but you can control how you interact with others – whether it is a positive or negative experience.

The people you meet in the following chapters have gone down this path themselves. They didn’t make the choice to use a wheelchair but they have made the choice on how they want to approach their relationships, as a friend, co-worker, or as a parent and spouse. Listen to what they have to say about the choices they’ve made – because it can have a dramatic impact on your own life. That’s not just a matter of opinion. It’s a clinical fact.

Reconnecting in personal relationships literally saves lives.

Four years ago before Wheel:Life existed, I helped Bert Burns start Life After Spinal Cord Injury as an outreach program sponsored by UroMed – one of the nation’s largest mail order providers of urology supplies. A former Paralympian, Bert Burns is a C6-7 quadriplegic who travels the country as an advocate, speaking with newly-injured patients about Life After Spinal Cord Injury.



Pictured here is Bert Burns, founder of Life After Spinal Cord Injury

We were compelled into action by a clinical study published by a rehabilitation nursing journal. In summary, the study showed that spinal cord injury patients who left rehab with two factors in place were proven to have a significantly longer lifespan than others who did not.

Those life-changing factors are:

1. A sense of self-independence, and
2. A network of support.

Makes sense, right? Those two factors determine the success and livelihood of able-bodied folks as well. For friends who use wheelchairs, successfully adjusting to your new life is even more dependent on having those factors of support and independence in place.

You may not be to the point yet to where you see how all of this matters. We understand that and we're asking you to trust us with one small commitment on your side.

1. **Please commit to reading this book from beginning to end.**
Take the time to listen to the stories of people just like you who are sharing how they reconnected. After you read these stories, please do one more thing.
2. **Promise you will strive in one area of your life to reconnect with people around you,** whether it is through joining a peer support group, or an adaptive sports team, or simply joining a local trivia team on Tuesday nights.

Get out of the house in one small way each week to rejoin life. After 90 days, look back and ask yourself – do you feel more connected now than you did 90 days ago?

We believe the answer will be yes!

Wheel:Life wants to hear your story, just like the ones featured in the following chapters. At the end of this book, you'll find out how you can share your own account. When you do, you may find yourself featured as a star in our next book!

Thank you in advance for reading our book on Reconnecting. We can't wait to hear from you after you've finished turning these pages.

Chapter 2: Ather Sharif Connects on His College Campus

Editor's Note: Ather Sharif is a computer science graduate student at Saint Joseph University in Philadelphia, PA. Originally from Pakistan, Ather was in a car accident in 2013 in North Dakota where he was pursuing his Master's degree. The car accident left him paralyzed.

Since then, Ather has relocated to Philadelphia and is now living by himself in an apartment close to his school. Just two years post-injury, he joined Magee Rehab Hospital's quad rugby team and created the SCI Video Blog site <http://www.scivideoblog.com/> through which he has built a virtual platform for other people with SCI so they can share resources and learn from others.



Ather gets out and enjoys life on campus

Sharif: “I was injured due to a car accident in March 2013. I’m originally from Pakistan and was attending University of North Dakota as an international graduate

student during that time. All my family is back home so I had to go through the whole process of rehab by myself.”

“I had Rashid and Yasmeen (they reside in NJ), friends of my uncle and Justine, my significant other, by my side through most of the rehab and recovery process. Without them, all this would have been impossible. I went through an emergency surgery and was in critical condition at the hospital in Fargo, ND for three weeks and then transferred to Magee Rehab in Philly for rehab. Once here, I went through two more surgeries at Jefferson Hospital.”

“I was discharged from Magee on July 10, 2013 only to be re-admitted at Jefferson for a serious condition known as sepsis on July 12. I spent my 24th birthday (July 15) alone in the hospital.”

“Having gone through all these stages of life alone, I built incredible endurance and strength, which has helped me since then.”

“Over this same time period, I have lost many friendships and made new ones. I believe such a time is when relationships are truly tested. It’s been a huge eye-opener for me, but I’m glad I was given the opportunity to filter out the people who really mattered - even though it was the hard way.”

“As far as making new relationships is concerned, I believe we’re in an era where people are becoming more aware of disabilities. They hardly see that as a limitation and so the person shouldn’t either.”

“My advice would be to just be yourself. If you go to a classroom and sit in the corner being afraid to mingle, people get the vibe that you want to be left alone. Hence, nobody talks to you.”

“But if you go sit in the middle of the classroom, participate and mingle, they immediately open up. Dating is very similar. People like to help people who help themselves and when they see you strive forward, they want to be more involved in your life.”



Ather with his beautiful girlfriend, Justine

“SCI can be considered a tragedy - but not a trademark. Spinal cord injury has never been a limitation, but my attitude was. People shouldn’t stop doing what they like to do.”

Overcoming the Fear of Losing His Life’s Work

“I am a software engineer and after the injury, I thought I had lost my career because I couldn’t use my hands. I would cry and scream at God, begging Him to give me my hands back.”

“Even though I was the captain of my university’s wheelchair basketball team and a very active sportsman, I would always pray for hands rather than legs. But it wasn’t until I started working on SCI Video Blog that I realized I still had my technical ability.”

“I was slower, yes, but ten times smarter. This is what spinal cord injury does to you. It takes away a few things but gives you more in return. You just have to figure it out.”

“Currently, I am attending Saint Joseph’s University as a computer science graduate student. On January 1st I launched EvoXLabs (<http://evoxlabs.org>), which is an initiative to serve the community of Philadelphia through web technologies. We aim to provide people with vision impairment an improved web experience, and we provide the non-profit organizations of Philadelphia free websites and webapps equipped with modern and completely accessible tools. I also submitted my research to the Web for All Conference <http://www.w4a.info/2015/> on

accessible graphs. The research presentation is at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnACsbcUxY>.

The Value of Reconnecting Through Quad Rugby

“Quad rugby is an amazing sport. It makes you realize there truly are no limitations. Metal chairs gives you the feel of armor and hitting each other takes away your fears of being fragile. Nobody gets hurt - it’s safe.”

“For me, quad rugby gave me back my independence. I would wait for Tuesdays and then catch the bus in a cold dark night to go to practice and come back - all alone. It’s hard to catch up with your homework during school when you have the sports commitment, but the moment you step on that court, you leave all your miseries, tensions and stress behind.”



Anther outside of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Ather's Final Thoughts on SCI and Independence

“I live by myself. I’m a C5/C6 quadriplegic and as independent as a one-year-post-injury could get. There are so many years left for me to be on this planet. Why not live those years to the fullest? I have always believed that the limitations of your injury shouldn’t stop you. Faith in your future helps you to strive forward.”

For more information on Ather and what he does everyday to stay engaged in the world around him, feel free to check out his personal website: <http://www.athersharif.com>

Chapter 3: Eric Kolar Connects through His Passion for Sound

Editor's Note: At 15-years-old, Eric Kolar never could have imagined that one night out with his friends would change his life forever. Today, C6-7 quadriplegic Eric Kolar works for UroMed, one of the nation's largest urology supply companies, overseeing their Virginia branch office. Outside of work, he volunteers as a peer counselor for the non-profit program, Life After Spinal Cord Injury. Eric feels that sharing his own story of recovery and success after SCI is just one way to pay it forward as gratitude to all that helped him find his own path in life.



Eric Kolar pays it forward by sharing his story

Kolar: "I remember way back in 1992, when I was in the 9th grade, seeing a friend named Leslie around school, rolling around in her wheelchair. One day after seeing her, I said to myself, "I'll never end up in a wheelchair."

"About four weeks later, at the age of 15, I woke up to find myself lying in The Medical Center hospital bed, struggling with the realization that I was now a C6/7 quad."

"It was just a few days after the last day of school. Some buddies came by my house late at night and we decided to go to Alabama (just a few minutes away) to pick up some girls and go swimming. We came back to Georgia and my buddies knew of an apartment complex where we could go swimming, we just had to jump the fence."

"We're all there horsing around, about five guys and a couple girls. We're all walking around with our chests poked out like we were some tough guys.. We'd been diving into the shallow end of the pool, just as any kid would, skimming the top as to not go too deep in the shallow end."

“After several of us had been coming in and out of the pool, the surface of the ground around the pool had become very slick. I remember pushing off as I dove into the pool, but this time it was a tad different. Instead of diving out, my foot slipped and I ended up going straight down.”

“I had my hands in front of me, but it seemed like I was shot out of a cannon. My hands quickly pushed from hitting the bottom and I nailed the bottom of the pool with my head, first directly on top and then the impact drove my face into my chest, causing me to crack my head open on the backside as well. I clearly remember opening my eyes and saying "Oh shit."

“I swam to the top as best as I could, put my arms up on the side, and said "Y'all get me out, I can't move my legs."

At that time, the girls began screaming as blood was gushing out of the blows to my head. Gently, my buddies lifted me out of the water and lay me down. We were scared and didn't think of calling for help, because we had snuck into the pool. I recall not being able to sit up.”

“The guys lifted me up and over the six-foot privacy fence, rushed me up a long hill and put me into the back seat of a two-door car. We were off to The Medical Center ER in a flash.”

“En route, I remember being very dizzy. My buddy in the front seat kept holding my eyes open and I was squeezing my legs -- they felt like wet rubber.”

“We got to the ER and my buddies ran in to get help. I remember looking up and seeing the father of one of my best friends. He was an emergency room nurse, and the look on his face wasn't good.”

“I little while later I woke up to see my dad leaning over me and the emotion on his face tore me up. I was so worried that I'd be in trouble for sneaking into the pool.

There I was, likely paralyzed, and I was worried about getting in trouble.”



Although Kolar was paralyzed, he knew that he was extremely lucky.

“The doctors told me I had a cervical fusion. I remained at The Medical Center for about two weeks. At that time, I had mostly lost the function of my fingers, but still had my arms and upper body.”

“I was transferred to the Shepherd Center in Atlanta and I began the rehab process. I progressed quickly, gaining back my dexterity and helped out others as best as I could while there. I came to realize that I'd be paralyzed, but I was extremely lucky as there were so many there that were much, much worse in terms of the level of their injuries.”

“After three months, I was discharged and back home I went, joining my friends and classmates in the tenth grade. That was one hell of a summer vacation, I tell you.”

“I had a great support from my family and many great friends. It was definitely a huge adjustment going back to high school as a sophomore, now in a wheelchair.”



Kolar adjusted well to his new set of wheels, with the help and support of his friends and family
“Other students were interested in my wheelchair, but I had a lucky break. Those students had already grown comfortable and understanding of wheelchair users as my friend Leslie who also used a wheelchair had been there a few years prior to me and was still there as well.”

“Getting used to class was tough at times. The placement of my desk was always a pain and just trying to be treated as an equal was a challenge. The most difficult part was being treated normal by the staff, not my friends.”

“My friends were a great help and you know, they never treated me any different and I love them all for that. I still had ups and downs with my buddies and we had our disagreements. Just because I was in a chair, didn't mean we didn't have quarrels.”



Despite being in a wheelchair, Eric was never treated differently by his friends

“One thing that I thoroughly enjoyed was the girls. I’ll admit, I wasn't a hunk, close, but the girls were definitely curious. I loved it.”

“I definitely had some serious relationships in high school and my fair share of not-so-serious ones. Many times, I just felt like I couldn't pass up ‘opportunities’.”

“I can honestly say that I was never treated any different by the girls. I can say that at times, I was a bit insecure about dating and being in a chair. I couldn't do this or I couldn't do that. Well, there are many things that able-bodied people can't do too. We all have our limits”.

“Sure, I would get down about things. Some break-ups were rough. When you do find that one person who loves you for you, you know it and it feels great.”

Eric Discovers His Passion for Sound

“I believe it was 1986. The first Beastie Boys video was being shown on MTV. I couldn't believe this catchy music that I'd not heard before. It was a mix of rock and rap.”

“I'd already liked rock as my older brother and cousin influenced my musical taste. With the Beastie Boys, there was something a bit different though. The bass was more pronounced in the music. I began noticing the beats became an integral part of what interested me.”

“I would consider myself an overall music lover. I listen to all types of music, from the classic rock of the 70's and 80's, to the rock and rap of today, but what I enjoy the most is being able to get in my car and shake the pavement with my audio set up.”

“It consists of multiple amplifiers and subwoofers. I've always had an interest in modified cars and trucks, leaning mainly to the extreme audio side of it.”

“I don't just see my car as a means of transportation, but almost as a piece of freedom.”

Not trying to "separate" myself as a wheelchair user, but when driving, it feels that we're all truly equal as the driver next to you on the road. We're all sitting down. Most drivers next to you don't even realize that you use a chair.”



Eric's car helps him to feel independent and free

“What does distinguish me though is that I'm usually rolling down the road with thousands of watts of amplified power pushing my music to levels that many cannot handle. I love it. It's a rush. It's an addiction.”

“Many don't quite understand it. It's a great stress reliever, being able to get in and "beat the block down" as some would say. I've had an audio system in my car since day one. The day I received my license at 16, the very first place I went was the car audio shop and had an amplifier installed. It's been on since then.”

“From that time in 1992, to the current day, my car audio infatuation has increased immensely. I now attend and compete in car audio competitions where you compete in SPL (sound pressure level) and "battling".”

“For the SPL portion, a microphone is placed on the lower right hand corner of the front glass and with the vehicle sealed up (doors closed and windows up) a low frequency tone is played as loud as you're able to get it and you produce the decibel (dB) #. “

“So far, my personal best has been 152.3 dB. That's quite loud, but many are much, much louder to the point that they can easily shatter their windshield with the turn of the volume knob.”



Kolar loves to deck out cars and trucks, especially with subwoofers like this

“With battling, you and another competitor, based on classes of amplified power and number of speakers, basically fight to see who's loudest, Not only loudest, but who has the best quality of sound.”

“You cannot just throw equipment in a vehicle and win. It needs to sound nice and clean, not distorted. So there is a lot of time and money that goes into this passion.”

“For those that are interested in this hobby and don't think that they can be involved because they use a chair and may have a little higher injury level, you are hands-down wrong.”

“I know many higher-level quads who drive vans with lifts and compete in audio competitions. I've seen plenty of accessible vans that are extremely "tricked" out with bass sounds being produced that are just insane! Car audio does not discriminate!”

“It's easy to research if you are interested as there are so many sites online nowadays as well as videos on YouTube that can show you where to begin. I can almost guarantee you that once you start, if audio is your passion, you cannot stop.”



Eric doesn't believe that a car's audio can be too loud

“Not everyone will go to the levels that I have gone, but even upgrading your audio system in your vehicle is usually a must once attending these type of competitive audio shows. There is no such thing as a "factory" audio system to us in the "basshead" community.”

“The number of women competing in the audio scene has grown in recent years too. It's great to see a female with a kickin' system. Being in a relationship with a lady that really enjoys the passion that you have is amazing.”

Eric's Advice for Exploring New Relationships

“One of the best things that I would tell someone in a chair who may feel a little hesitant in trying to start a relationship is definitely don't hold back. Just go for it. Being in a chair or otherwise, not all relationships work, so just accept that. You have to initiate the effort and talk to the other person.”

“I'm actually somewhat of a shy person, but I realize that I have to speak up. Once you begin speaking, most of the time, the conversation will go from there.”

“Definitely don't get discouraged if the conversation goes south. Understand that you want to find someone that cares for you and there is always someone out there that will care about you, for who you are. You just need to keep looking for that person, be it online, out and about or thru current friendships. Relationships don't always work out, but when you've met "the right one", you'll know it.”

Learn more about Eric Kolar's personal journey of success after SCI at:
<http://www.uromed.com/why-school-matters-after-your-spinal-cord-injury-by-eric-kolar/>

Chapter 4: Thomas Morris Connects with His Unique Appearance and Personality

Editor's Note: As a recent amputee, Thomas Morris discovered a whole new world when he attended his first Abilities Expo <http://www.abilities.com/> three years ago. Today, he's an ambassador and care advocate for a new educational program—www.SaveMyMedicalSupplies.org—that aims to help Medicare beneficiaries in receiving necessary medical equipment, supplies and repairs.



This is one of Thomas' favorite t-shirts, for obvious reasons!

Morris: "I began using a wheelchair in January of 2011 after my left leg was amputated below the knee due to an infection in my foot caused by having diabetes. My amputation was on January 14, 2011. I immediately went to rehab the following week. I received my first wheelchair on January 27th. I actually went home the same day. I lasted about a week before I began modifying it."

“First, I added a cup holder to the arm. I bought a water bottle holder for a bicycle and zip-tied it to the chair. I then got rid of the foot pedals. Next, I painted the black wheels an aluminum color. The last thing I did was add a few stickers and remove the wheelie bars. That was quite a rig! I recently was gifted a Quickie T.I. and I’m sure I’m going to trick it out as well.”



Thomas was never treated differently by his friends after losing his leg

Thomas Talks About the Dynamic of His Current Relationships

“My really close friends didn’t treat me any different after I lost my leg and started using a wheelchair in addition to a prosthesis, because they know how I am. Family members were the ones who really treated me differently.”

“Hovering is the worst! While you’re doing something, they stand there and watch you do it. It’s happened hundred times – they’re waiting for you to fall so they can pick you up. Every time, I’m thinking while it happens , ‘Stop hovering!’ Now I have the confidence to actually tell them.”

“My advice to others would be to speak up about what you want or more importantly, don’t want from your family members in terms of help and support. Set those expectations – don’t be rude but be loud and clear.”

Finding Inspiration by Becoming One Yourself

“Not long after my amputation, I was introduced to an amputee support group. I’ve met a lot of other amputees through that group. At first I went to the meetings for myself. After a while I went to try and inspire new amputees. That’s one of the reasons why I got involved with an advocacy group called SaveMyMedicalSupplies.org.



Thomas serves as an advocate for people with diabetes on behalf of Save My Medical Supplies

“SaveMyMedicalSupplies.org [SMMS] is an educational resource for Medicare beneficiaries, created by the American Association for Homecare. They are committed to protecting people from ongoing Medicare reform mistakes that impede or limit access to quality home care.”

“I serve as an advocate for people with diabetes on behalf of SMMS, and have shared my story on their website to help educate the masses about the healthcare requirements of diabetics, and what can happen if they don’t have the right access to quality care or quality medical supplies like test strips and meters.”

In the past two years, I’ve also attended the Abilities Expo to broaden my horizons on what is available out there in terms of products and services that can make my life easier. I also plan on attending the Amputee Coalition National Conference in Tucson, Arizona this summer. I also became a certified peer visitor through the Amputee Coalition so that I can go to hospitals and

talk with new amputees to help them along their journey and let them know, “you’re going to be all right.”

Pushing Limits by Being Physically Active



Thomas participates in a 5K after his amputation

“I recently started running, after my amputation! In less than one year, I had completed two 5k races. In my second year after amputation, I went skydiving on my birthday. I also went to two separate O.P.A.F. Clinics to ride a horse and take an introductory course to S.C.U.B.A Diving. By the end of my second year post-amputation, I had also completed two more 5k races.”

“It’s so important to stay active after your injury or a major physical change, not just for your physical health but also for your mental health.”

If They're Going to Stare, Make It Worth Their While

“One of the things that I should mention is that through this journey. I’ve continued to wear a kilt. Yes, a kilt.”

“That gets a lot of comments which eventually lead to people noticing the prosthesis. Most of the time, they wonder why a guy is wearing what looks like a skirt. It takes them a moment after that to notice my artificial leg! I really don’t mind the questions that generates. It helps in telling my story just to be able to educate people about amputation and to let them know that life does go on.”



Thomas at the 2014 Medtrade conference in Atlanta, GA, with Wheel:Life team members Amirah Salim (left) and Monica Manley (right)

The Ups and Downs of Dating Don't Revolve Around His Legs

My girlfriend at the time of my amputation broke up with me a week after Valentine's Day. She said that she “had a lot going on” but I personally think she couldn't deal with the “new me.” The one thing I wish I had done is given her a better out in the beginning. It would have been easier to tell her ‘if you can't deal with this, it's fine, I'll be ok.’

I'd rather she would have said it outright than strung me along for two months following my surgery.

I met my current girlfriend who lives in Florida when she was in town visiting friends in Atlanta. She's a public health nurse. I met her at a party in July and it just progressed from there. It was one of those moments where you just sit down and start talking, and keep talking. Here we are eight months later!

The only question she's ever had is about how my prosthesis is attached and how it works.

On our first date, I was in a wheelchair and she wasn't even phased. When she met me, I was walking but our first date was after I got out of the hospital for a pressure sore and I used a wheelchair during that date.



Thomas with his stunning girlfriend

When we go on dates, it's no different than before my amputation. It's great to be with someone who sees you for you.

Thomas Had to Adjust More than His Girlfriend Did

Dating was more of an issue for me than her because you never know how someone is going to handle your injury.

Because she's a nurse, she's seen it all, so it doesn't bother her. But you want to get that out of the way, so I think it's healthy to just talk about it right up front at the beginning of any new relationship. I wear shorts or a kilt all the time, so there's no hiding it in my case. And I think that's healthy.

If you're a new amputee, don't worry about dating. When the right person comes along, they'll either be able to deal with you or not, if they can't, they're not the right person for you.

That's no different than them not liking your hair color or your personality or whatever. So don't obsess on it.



Thomas conquers a rock wall with ease

Thomas' Advice for Healthy Relationships

The first part is getting healthy with how you feel about yourself. You have to be comfortable with yourself before anyone else will be. I know some people that are very sensitive to jokes about “peg legs” or whatever and some don’t like to tell their story. To each their own. The more comfortable you are, the more you don’t mind talking about it, the more at ease others are around you.

If you’re pissed off and bitter, no one will want to talk to you. My mom always says, “We’re not going to have any pity parties.” And we don’t.

Setting Healthy Boundaries is Key

I really don’t like it when people push me in my wheelchair without my permission. **I always say, “if I need help, I’ll ask for it.”** If you offer help, and I say no, respect it. Let me struggle. That’s part of setting healthy boundaries and that’s part of healthy relationships.

I was in Augusta, Georgia recently seeing old friends. The best part of that weekend is that no one offered to help. I actually fell out of my chair crossing the street – and they laughed, just like guy friends would do. It was great! I felt like one of the guys with my old friends. And you can too. Just be open, upfront and honest about what you want and don’t want.

Connect with Thomas through SaveMyMedicalSupplies.org, the advocacy program he works with to help protect Medicare beneficiaries nationwide:

<http://savemymedicalsupplies.org/medicare-reform-mistakes-impact-diabetics-diabetes-supplies/>

Chapter 5: Natalie Barnhard Connects Wheels with Wings



Natalie with her service dog, Gabe.

Editor's Note: At the age of 24, Natalie Marie Barnhard became a quadriplegic. On October 22, 2004, a catastrophic accident changed her life when a 600-pound exercise weight machine fell over and landed on top of Natalie. She was working as a physical therapist assistant and licensed massage therapist at the time of the injury.

Since 2004, with her strong faith in God, and support from her parents, family and friends, Natalie has been dedicated to intense rehabilitation and recovery therapy in Atlanta, GA at the Shepherd Center and many other excellent recovery facilities that practice Integrative Manual Therapy, offering the hope of walking again.

Natalie's dream has been to start a foundation in her community to not only encourage and advocate for people but also help them get money the expensive specialized medical care they may need. This is why she created the Wheels With Wings Foundation, established in Buffalo, New York. It is a recognized 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

The Foundation became a vision and personal goal of Natalie's early on in her injury while experiencing how challenging it can be to obtain critical items such as intense rehabilitation

therapy, home modifications, and other equipment which is needed as a result of a spinal cord injury. Below, we talk with Natalie about her thoughts on relationships and returning to an active life after spinal cord injury.

Returning to Life – Whether You’re Ready or Not

Barnhard: “It’s definitely important to get involved in things, and get out of the house after you go home from rehab. The first couple years of my injury, I didn’t want to leave the house. I didn’t even want to be around other people with disabilities. I didn’t really want to fully engage in “that” life. I just couldn’t accept it.

Eventually, you realize it helps you when you do get out and get involved in a peer support program or some other connection point like adaptive sports. You can share your stories with people like you, you can vent with each other, you can get mad at each other. You start realizing that you’re not alone, and it starts bringing you out of your shell.

“It’s really easy to close yourself off.”

You can trap yourself in your own bubble of self-pity and despair and depression. That cycle of what-if’s and sadness can trap you.

The Secret to Natalie’s Return to Self



Natalie learned to accept her new life and move forward with the support of her faith and family

For me, the secret to getting out of that trap was a good support system and my faith in God. My family, they let me grieve for my loss. They let me go through what I needed but they also pushed me. They didn't let me wallow in it too long.

Their refusal to let me languish caused some fights and arguments. It was not a happy time in our house, but I needed that. I needed those people to look me in the face and tell me, "Your life isn't over. There's still so much that you can do."

"Anyone who has an SCI needs to understand that they need to take that time to grieve for their loss. And that's ok."



Natalie says it's ok to take time to grieve

It's ok to be sad. It's ok to mourn what you cannot do anymore. It gets you ready to move on by going through those emotions. Be angry! Because if you suppress those feelings, at some point it's going to come out and it will be a lot harder to deal with them.

Some people who don't take time to grieve so they can move on end up never leaving their house again. Some turn to drugs, alcohol, whatever it may be.

Fighting Through Chronic Pain and Challenges

I know, myself, that chronic pain depresses you. It makes you very irritable and that's hard for other people to be around. I have a big support system and I still have had a hard time with that. You really do have to work at not being depressed. It's a conscious choice you have to make.

It's not always related just to SCI either. Able-bodied people struggle with depression too. Everybody's life has challenges.

“Time doesn't take away my struggles. But my perspective has changed over time.”

Time has taken away my wounds and helped me accept and grow, but time doesn't make life any easier. I still have my daily frustrations. I've just learned how to deal with some of them.



Natalie works on her triceps during a strengthening session

In the beginning after SCI, if one little thing went wrong – like the wheelchair van was late to pick me up for rehab, it would ruin my whole entire day. It was like a meltdown! My mom would look at me and say, “Natalie, it's not the end of the world.” But for my mental state at the time, it was. One little thing would shatter me.

Now that I feel more healthy and happy in my own skin, because I've grieved and moved on, those little things aren't such a big deal any more.

Rejoining the World in a Way that Feels Right

Getting back out in the community takes time to get used to. You feel like everybody is staring at you, you feel awkward. I'd go out with my friends and they'd be in their cute little dresses bouncing around at the bar, talking to guys. And I'd just be sitting there, in my power wheelchair, feeling so alone. My stomach would be in knots. It was hard.

Now instead, I try to go to a different kind of get together, like a dinner where everyone is sitting down and talking on the same level. We can have drinks and chat and it's a great time without a lot of focus on physical issues.

For example, due to the level of my injury, my vocal chords aren't as strong anymore and now my voice is softer. So it's hard for me to go to a large club or bar where the music is loud and people are screaming. No one can hear me over the noise.



Natalie's friends and family joined together for Natalie's Walk in 2012

I've grown out of some of those kinds of situations anyways. I'm not in my early 20s anymore. It is a lot nicer now to hang out with a small group of people who care, and you just enjoy each other's company.

I've had friends I've lost because they wanted to drink and party and not be responsible for me or anyone else when they're out. I got hurt at the age though that people were starting to get into their careers and go their separate ways, so it felt like I was being abandoned more than I was. People were slowly starting to do their own thing with jobs, getting married, raising kids. It was just hard for me to see that happening.

When that happened, I felt like my life was at a standstill. I've done a lot of therapy to get past that feeling because it was hard to keep that motivation.

The Reality Check of SCI

You hear these stories about people with SCI and they sometimes sound miraculous. Everything sounds so simple. It's not always simple and it's ok if you're not that way. It does take work to feel whole and comfortable in your own skin again.

Some of those stories make it sound like if you work extremely hard, you'll get out your wheelchair one day and walk again. That's not always true. It's not even usually true. But I have made tremendous strides in my own physical therapy over the last 10 years. When I was first injured, I had no arm movement – at all. Nothing.

“I couldn't even move my hair out of my face.”

I've gained a lot of feeling back and I work very hard to stay healthy and in shape. I look at it like anybody else. Able-bodied people need to work out to stay healthy and I do too. I think it's even more important for someone in a chair to work out. I've never had a skin issue because I stay healthy and take care of myself.

The Silver Lining of SCI

You know, everybody has their cross to bear, it doesn't matter who you are. Everyone has a “wheelchair” – you just can't always see it. It's relative to the person and unique to you. The worst thing you've gone through is the worst thing for you, but it may not be for someone else depending on their circumstances. We all struggle with the same emotional issues even though the physical causes may be different. Hard is hard.

Lifting Others Up with Wheels and Wings



Early on, even before my injury when I was a therapist, I always wanted to start some sort of wellness program but I never in a million years thought it would revolve around SCI. I especially never thought that I myself would be in the program or in a wheelchair!

I remember after I got hurt crying about the fact that I thought I had been given a gift in helping and healing others just to have it taken away. My mother said, “God would never do that. That’s not our God. He has something so big for you.”

“I always felt that way even when I was a little girl. I always felt like I had something important to do.”



Natalie has advocated for disability rights on Capitol Hill.

I never really knew what it was going to be. It was such a weird feeling. I knew I loved working with people so when I discovered physical therapy and massage, it was the perfect fit. I would bounce around the gym from patient to patient, and I loved it. So to be confined to a chair was frustrating. I slowly started to feel God saying, “Help other people. Keep helping as you are.”

I learned really quick how to be my own care advocate. My insurance plan wanted my therapy to be done after 6 months and as a clinician, I knew that wasn’t going to cut it. I had to fight very, very hard for myself. That sucked.

I started to feel like I wanted to do this foundation to help people in the same situation. One day a friend and I went to get some sushi, and had a couple glasses of sake, and all of a sudden we had a name for the organization: Wheels with Wings! We were doodling on napkins for logos. It was hilarious.

From there came the physical therapy center. That's been a big dream for me and it's finally happening here in upstate New York.

Natalie's Final Thoughts on Faith in Life After SCI

God is so good to me. Finally after 10 years post-injury, I feel like God's timing is so perfect. If you would have put these people and this need for a rehab center in front of me 10 years ago, I wouldn't have been ready or able to do this for my community. Years ago, I wouldn't have recognized these opportunities in front of me.

Today, I'm ready to hit the ground running! It's so exciting to be meeting so many people who are coming together to help with this dream, including doctors and other supporters.

"I've finally got a home of my own in helping people."

It's an amazing moment when you realize the reason and the purpose for why you are here. And I have. It makes all of this worth it, even the SCI. It truly does. It doesn't make me less frustrated some days that I have to have someone help me get dressed and showered and use the bathroom.

But, if I don't put my energy into thinking about those things and what I can't do, and instead I say, "I just gave somebody a grant to do \$10,000 worth of therapy, and now they can transfer themselves in and out of their wheelchair" – that's an incredible feeling and one I'm so willing to have in exchange for the path I've had to go down to get here.

I feel so blessed that I have an opportunity to do something like that and to give back in this way.

About Wheels With Wings

Wheels With Wings' mission is to assist individuals who have suffered a spinal cord injury and their families, to *Rise Above* and recover from this catastrophic injury. Individual grant awards, education, resources, awareness and advocacy are ways Wheels With Wings will work on improving the lives of people with this injury to become independent and productive and truly make a difference. Learn more at: <http://wheelswithwings.org>

Connecting with Natalie

Natalie's journey continues to move forward beyond her own traumatic injury as she strives to help people. She is now in the beginning development stages of opening up a state-of-the-art spinal cord recovery institute in Western New York where it is desperately needed & can help many people. Her dream is to create a unique one-of-a-kind facility that will help other people rise above their injuries similar to the way she has in her own life. With her faith in God, support from family, friends, and the community Natalie works hard to overcome tragedy and use her experience to make a difference in other people's lives! Visit her website at: <http://nataliebarnhard.com>.

Chapter 6: Chris Malcom Connects with His Daughter by Understanding Disability



Chris Malcom with his daughter, Madison

Editor's Note: Chris Malcom is a C6-7 quadriplegic who was paralyzed 30 years ago in a car accident. Chris completed his rehab at the world renowned Shepherd Center in Atlanta, GA and went on to compete as a top-tier wheelchair racer at an international level for many years. Today, he is the founder of the iPush Foundation <http://ipush.org> and the Vice-President of Operations for At Home Medical, <http://www.athomemedical.com/> an online medical supply company that delivers throughout the US and Canada. In both roles, he serves individuals who use wheelchairs on a daily basis.

A Difficult Story with a Silver Lining

Malcom: "I became a complete C-7 quad on November 9, 1991 as the result of a car accident. I was a sophomore in college at the time. I'm not proud of it but I was drinking and driving when I flipped my car four times. I thank God that I was alone and did not hurt anyone other than myself."

“After the wreck, I was rushed to the hospital and admitted into ICU. When I woke up, I knew immediately I was paralyzed. I wasn’t able to move my hands and had no idea or understanding of what I was going to do.”

“I stayed in ICU for a month. During that month I underwent two surgeries. The first surgery was on November 12. Due to my vertebrae being shattered, three inches of my hip bone was taken to fuse to my spinal cord.”

“Unfortunately, I was at a “teaching hospital” where students assisted and performed a lot of the procedures and my first surgery did not work as I woke up in the middle of it. That’s a long story but needless to say from there a group of experienced physicians and staff took over my care.”

“On November 19, another three inches was removed from my other hip and a second surgery was performed. I knew that surgery was successful because afterward I could move some of my fingers. I was then moved to the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, GA where I stayed for two months. During my stay at Shepherd, I was taught to be completely independent and I went back to college the next semester.”

Probably the best thing about being at the Shepherd Center was that I was surrounded by people and therapists that had spinal cord injuries similar to my own. My mindset was, ‘If they can do it, I can do it.’”



Chris Malcom with iPush Foundation donation recipient, 9-year-old Alexis, and her mother

Adjusting to Life after SCI Wasn't Just His Effort – It Was Everyone's

“I can honestly say that I was surrounded the best family and friends that anyone could have asked for. I was lucky that nothing really changed with my friendships. The people that were, and are, my good close friends remain my good close friends and the people that were just acquaintances remain acquaintances.”

If you are newly injured, my advice would be to surround yourself with the people that are always helping you and visiting you when you're in the hospital.



Chris Malcom pictured here with his skilled team from At Home Medical

“My friends were constantly there for me when I wanted them the least and needed them the most. That's how I realized how good of friends they were, and still remain.”

The Million Dollar Question: Dating

“How did I start dating again? I just did. I never thought of as being any different than it was when I could walk. If I met someone I liked, I would ask them out. Sometimes they would say yes and that was great, and sometimes they would say no and I'd move on.”

“That’s how it was before I was in a wheelchair so I never thought of dating as any different after I became paralyzed. It never bothered me if a girl didn’t want to go out with me because of my chair.”

“I met my wife at a cookout at my roommate’s house. My wife’s sister was an occupational therapist at the Shepherd Center. She brought one of her newly injured patients to our cookout and just happened to bring her sister (who is now my wife, Andee) with her. I really liked Andee but I was dating someone else at the time.”

“A couple of month later, after my girlfriend and I broke up, I called Andee and asked her out. We hit it off immediately.”

“One day, I got a brand new wheelchair that I thought was really cool. That night Andee and I went on a date and she didn’t say anything about my cool new chair so I was kind of bummed.”

“When I asked her why she didn’t say anything about my new chair, her response was ‘I don’t think about you being in a wheelchair, so I didn’t notice.’ A month later, I asked her to marry me.”



Chris leads by example, teaching his daughter that when there’s a will, there’s a way

Addressing the Fears of the In-Laws

“My wife is the youngest of three girls. I think the biggest concern my in-laws had in the beginning was my independency.”

“Before they met me, they might have thought I was going to be someone that their daughter would constantly have to care for.”

“They had never been around anyone that used a wheelchair. The good thing was that my sister-in-law worked at the Shepherd Center and she may have eased some of their concerns.”

Parenting: You Can Be One If You Want to Be

“One big misconception is that a lot of people have is just because you’re in a wheelchair, you can’t have kids. That couldn’t be further from the truth. Having kids isn’t as easy as it is for an able-bodied person but it is definitely a possibility. There are several procedures that allow people with SCI to have children.”

“Over the course of 10 years, my wife and I went through several rounds of in-vitro fertilization. My wife and I decided to do it one last time -- and it worked. My daughter, Madison, was born in July of 2006.”

Madison Loves Her Daddy – And Doesn’t Care about His Wheels

“My daughter is the best! I try to show her that where there’s a will, there’s a way. She was probably three or four years old when she realized that not everyone’s dad is in a wheelchair.”

“She thinks the wheelchair is cool because she likes to ride in my lap. She’s at an age now that she has learned how to push it herself.”

“On the other hand, she sometimes senses my frustration in doing certain things that aren’t as easy for me. She’s getting to an age where she understands my situation better. She sometimes tells me that she’s sorry, I’m in a wheelchair. I love that her heart is caring.”

Dad and Daughter Unite Against Juvenile Diabetes

“Recently, my little girl was diagnosed with diabetes. I think dealing with my situation has certainly helped me and her deal with her medical condition. As my parents told me about my paralysis, I tell her the same about her diabetes.”

“We educate ourselves and each other about our situations and deal with it the best way we can. We adapt, and we live our lives just like anybody else would do.”



Chris enjoys a game of quad rugby, aka Murderball.

“I try to help her understand that there are a lot of people that deal with things just like we do but you don’t always see those things. I help her understand that I have to use my wheelchair just like she has to give herself shots of insulin. There are certain things we have to do and we just do them. I tell her that no matter the circumstances, we’re going to do our thing and live our life just like anybody else.”

Parting Words of Advice from Chris

My advice would be, “Don’t let your disability define you”. Where there’s a will, there’s a way and even though life with a spinal cord injury may be different, it doesn’t mean life is over.

One of my favorite quotes is from the movie *Shawshank Redemption*. Morgan Freeman says “Get busy living or get busy dying”. It may sound harsh to some people but I think the same can be said after you have a spinal cord injury.



Connect with Chris at www.ipush.org and at www.athomemedical.com.

Chapter 7: Todd Robinson Connects Through the Joy of Adoption

Editor's Note: Paraplegic Athlete Todd Robinson of Gainesville, Georgia, is a representative for UroMed, based in Suwanee, Georgia, which specializes in urological products, incontinent supplies, wound-care, ostomy and general medical supplies for patients who are making cash purchases. Wheel:Life reporter John E. Phillips talked with Robinson about some of the concerns that people in wheelchairs have, and also about the most important aspect of his life: his family.



Todd Robinson & his wife Melissa keep a down-home approach to everyday life - honest, humble and determined.

One Day on a Motorcycle Changed Everything

Robinson: “I was 15-years old, and my dad, some friends and I were riding in the woods through some grass on dirt bikes. The grass was so high that I didn’t see a stump in the grass. When I hit the stump, my bike flipped end-over-end. I was tangled-up in my motor and the impact broke my back.”

“I was dazed at first but thankfully not alone. When my dad reached me, he told me to lay still. We were a good distance into the woods, so the ambulance took about an hour to reach me. Although I didn’t have any major pain, I couldn’t breathe very well. I had no idea at the time that my back was broken. I was still able to wiggle my toes and move my feet.”

“When the paramedics arrived, they had to cut-off my motocross boots. Once the boots were off, my feet began to tingle and burn like they do when your leg goes to sleep. That was the last sensation I ever felt in my feet. When I was loaded into the emergency vehicle, the pain really began. The doctor told me later that my spinal cord started swelling, which created major

problems. After the pain hit, I went in and out of consciousness. I only have small memories of the time in the ambulance, the ER, the X-rays and then waking-up in intensive care after surgery.”



Todd was an avid motorcyclist prior to the accident that changed his life.

“When I got tangled up in the bike after I hit the stump, I was pinched between the front forks of my bike and the frame, which broke my thoracic vertebrae at sites 4, 5 and 6. It also broke off pieces of those vertebrae. At that point, it didn’t damage the spinal cord.”

The doctor said that the swelling, not the accident, caused the damage to my spinal cord.

“When it swelled, it pushed the nerves against the bone and pinched the nerves going to my lower extremities. The doctor said that my cord was intact and that the majority of the damage was to my nerves.”

“When I first woke up, my parents were around my bed, and the doctor started testing my legs and feet to determine what I could feel. I didn’t have much feeling. It was either the first or the second time when the doctor tested me that he told me I’d be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life and wouldn’t be able to move my legs, unless something dramatically changed.”

Todd’s Perspective on Life After Spinal Cord Injury

“When I was first injured, although I never admitted it, I was angry and frustrated. I did many things immediately after I was hurt just to prove that I could.”

“In recent years though, I’ve come to understand that God created everyone for a purpose, and He’s always in control. Even though I went through hard times and struggled with my

frustrations when I was injured, I always knew that He was still with me, watching over me and helping me get through all my problems.”

“Now that I’m older, I’ve realized that I should have been working on setting a better example for others with disabilities. You won’t find any hope for a better world on the news, and too much news will make you begin to wonder why, if the world’s such a terrible place, you even bother to get up every day.”

As my own faith has grown, I understand that everyone has problems to deal with.

“I’d rather have a physical disability than an emotional or a mental disability. I worked in a psychiatric hospital and know the anguish those patients experience. I’ve always had a sense of hope and have never believed in quitting any task that I’ve started. I’ve also grown and come to understand that God can use anyone, including people with disabilities.”



Todd strives to use his disability as a symbol of accomplishment when he competes in athletic events.

Reconnecting with Life After SCI

“A lot of people who are new to their injuries and who recently have gotten their wheelchairs ask, ‘Now what do I do?’” This question is hard to answer, because the answer lies within you. “However, the generic answer that seems to fit everyone is you need to set goals for yourself and your life. Think about what you’ve been planning to do before your injury and determine if you still can do those things now with your injury.”

“Some people may think they can’t and haven’t researched the possibilities of still achieving those goals they’ve set before their injuries. I was lucky, because my family believed that you worked toward a goal until you couldn’t possibly do it any longer. Whether you were hurt, sick, tired, depressed or injured didn’t matter. “

“You went after that goal until you couldn’t any more. That’s how I was raised.”

“Unfortunately, many people don’t have that same support system. So, get a good support system, if you don’t have one. Talk to the people in the hospital and the rehab centers, and they’ll help you find a support group where you can receive encouragement and support. Peer support can be the magic ingredient that helps you achieve far beyond your wildest dreams.”

“You also will find a good form of support at your local church. Remember that most people have some type of struggle in their life, but the challenges they face may not be as visible as yours. Many times able-bodied people have greater struggles and challenges than people in wheelchairs. Most people are afraid of life, of losing their jobs and their health, of death and of the unseen future.”

My paralysis is there all the time, so I don’t worry about it, nor am I afraid of it. I’ve learned how to deal with my injury and accept it.

“I’ve found that many people who are having problems in life don’t mind talking to me about their problems, because they can see my problem. So, I believe one of my purposes in life at this point is to listen and help other people with their problems.”



Todd and his wife Melissa love getting out to enjoy life on the Alabama coast!

Family Dynamics – On Wheels

“How you go about having a family varies, depending on your disability and your body’s functionality after your injury. In-vitro fertilization is one solution. However, when my wife and I married, she had a 1-1/2-year-old son who’s now my son. We later decided that there were so many kids who needed good homes, and we adopted a little girl. There are all types of options out there for having children.”

“Inevitably, once you figure out how you want to have them, you have to figure out how to take care of children when you have a disability. I always tell people that they’ll figure it out. I have a friend who’s a quadriplegic. He and his wife have a little girl, and he was concerned about how to hold and change a child without full use of his fingers.”

“But this guy’s a real hands-on Dad. He’s just figured out a way to do it. He’s learned his limitations and has determined what he needs to do to adapt to take care of his daughter.”

He wanted so badly to be a dad that he didn’t really care what he had to do to take care of his daughter – disability didn’t matter.

“He made-up in his mind that he would be hands-on and enjoy every moment with his daughter, and he does.” In my case, I was scared to death the first time I held our daughter Lydia, because she was tiny when we brought her home. I was afraid that if she kicked or arched her back, while I was in my chair holding her, she’d throw me off balance. I made sure I was as stable as I could be, and we never have had an accident. So, if you have kids, just jump in, and do it. Do all you

can, and ask for help if you need it. Enjoy your children. Live life to the fullest and enjoy your family.”



Todd believes the key to success in parenting is to actively participate- jump in and do it!

Connect with Todd via the UroMed blog site at:

<https://uromed.wordpress.com/2011/09/30/wheelchair-athlete-todd-robinson-says-you-can-have-kids-and-travel-with-your-disabilities/>

Chapter 8: Ashleigh Justice Connects on the Quad Rugby Field and as a Young Mother

Editor's Note: As a 15-year-old new driver, Ashleigh Justice of Phoenix, Arizona, was driving her family vehicle when tragedy struck and changed her life forever. Wheel:Life writer John E. Phillips sat down with Ashleigh to capture her story below.



Ashleigh Justice endured a life changing car accident that drastically changed her life.

The Day Life Changed For Quadriplegic Ashleigh Justice

Justice: I remember as a new driver, driving back with my family from a vacation in Texas. We thought my driving was relatively safe on the open highway, because there were very few cars on the road from Texas to Phoenix. On the open road, there was a semi tractor trailer that I needed to pass. As I started around him, he moved over into my lane. To complicate matters even more, there was a crosswind blowing across the highway. I tried to avoid him, and when I attempted to get back in my lane, I lost control of the car. The car went off the road as I tried to steer back, and my tires slipped on the shoulder of the road. Our car rolled over several times. I had my seatbelt on, and I wasn't speeding. When the car started rolling over, my sister was thrown out of the car, because she wasn't wearing her seatbelt.

She landed about 40 feet out into the desert from where the car eventually stopped. The roof of the car caved in on my side and caused a compression fracture in my neck and a brain injury. My sister and I were airlifted from the scene of the crash to the hospital. That's where they discovered I had a spinal cord and brain injury. I went into spinal cord shock, at least that's what I was told.

My head hit the car so hard that I didn't remember anything from 30 minutes before the accident. The first time I could remember anything was 3 days later when I woke up in the hospital. I was told that my sister went into cardiac arrest on the way to the hospital, but the paramedics brought her back. Although she sustained a broken collar bone, shoulder blade and had torn the muscles away from her spine, thankfully she was able to walk out of the hospital the day after the accident. I stayed in intensive care for 10 days and didn't know what the future held for me.

Before the accident, I was a normal teenager. I was in the marching band at our high school, and I played the cymbals. I was also very active in drama. I wasn't an actress, but I loved to build things and worked with the set designer, building the props. I was a free spirit. I went wherever I wanted to go and did whatever I wanted to do. If I didn't have a ride from where I was to where I wanted to be, I'd figure out a way to get a ride. Nothing could stop me mentally or physically. I was an A/B student and had planned to go out for the softball team the year after the accident.

I was dating a guy before the accident but not very seriously. I wanted to be an attorney. I liked being able to prove a point and then defending that position. I liked the exchange between two opposing viewpoints. I also wanted to be a marine biologist and was fascinated by the creatures of the ocean, especially the ones you couldn't see. I was an international baccalaureate and an honor student. I also really enjoyed writing and poetry. My sister was a star student, who'd always been on the honor roll. I really had a bright future in front of me before the accident.

Ashleigh Wakes Up And Isn't Prepared For Her New Life

Ashleigh had a hard time accepting what her injury did to her body. She didn't give up, and her short term memory and personality eventually returned.

The 10 days I spent in intensive care after my accident were the worst 10 days of my life. I felt like I was in a nightmare that I couldn't wake up from. The doctors had put me in an induced coma for 3 days to reduce the brain swelling. I remember the day the surgeons brought me out of the coma. I had to track my surgeon's finger with my eyes as the surgeon moved it. The surgeons also asked me questions, and I was to blink once for no and twice for yes. I had doctors and students all around me, as I began to come out of my coma, who were all looking at me. I remember feeling as though I only existed and had no thoughts and no memory.

While I was in the coma, the doctors did a spinal fusion on my neck, took a piece of bone from my hip and used it to replace a shattered vertebra and put titanium rods and plates in my back.

When I woke up, I remember being really dizzy and very sick. If my mother and my sister tried to take me around the hospital in a reclining wheelchair, I became very nauseated. The doctors diagnosed me with axonal shear injury.

During the accident, my brain hit my skull, creating problems with my short term memory and affecting my ability to talk. Sometimes I knew the words I wanted to say, but I couldn't say them. Not being able to say the words I wanted to caused me to be very frustrated, so I just quit talking. However, I gradually felt more like myself. A year passed before my short term memory returned.



Ashleigh wanted to find "Normal" again

Ashleigh eventually went back to high school and wanted to be a normal teenager again.

Immediately after I left the hospital and rehab, I went back to high school. I just wanted to be normal again. I knew I had my spinal cord injury and would be in a wheelchair, but I didn't want to be held back in school due to my brain injury.

Although my teachers were really great, I had a hard time learning and I was always exhausted. During those first 2 years back at school, I'd have to wake up at 4:00 every morning so my mom

could help me get dressed. This chore usually required about 2 hours. Next, I'd have a 2-hour bus ride to school, return home about 5:00 in the afternoon and then do homework before I could sleep. I was physically exhausted by the end of the day. I went from being an A/B student to being a C, D and F student.

I thought to myself, "Ok, I can't be a normal teenager because of my spinal cord injury, and now I can't even make good grades like I once made." These problems only added insult to my injury.

To make things even worse, my room was on the second story of my house, so I lost it. Everything that was personal to me as a teenager, I lost. My aunt and her three children had been evicted from their apartment after a divorce, so they came to live with us. My cousin took over my room and started playing with my stereo, slept in my bed and took all my posters off my walls. Then he started reading my journals. Everything that I felt was a part of my identity was trashed.

About the same time, my grandmother became really sick, so my mom, my sister and I moved in with her. I became a caregiver for my grandmother. My parents had been going through a rough time, and they had separated right before the accident occurred.

I was not only physically disabled, but the rest of my life was a big mess. The situation was so bad that my sister went to live with a friend. I lived in the living room for about 1 1/2 months, before my dad made the old house where we once lived accessible for me and my wheelchair. My uncle and the men he worked with volunteered the time and the materials needed to remake the house, so that I could get around in it. They took out walls, built a new shower and completely overhauled it. It was nice to be able to get around.

Ashleigh's Adventures in Rehab and Rugby

Ashleigh explains that, "The one glimmer of hope in this world when I was injured physically and mentally and having to adjust to family problems, housing problems and school problems was rehab."

The first 2 weeks of rehab I couldn't do anything for myself. I was still moving very slowly, because of my brain injury. I was in a mental fog and had a very difficult time thinking. I also had a broken collar bone and shoulder blade. I couldn't do anything on my left side. However, when that part of my body began to heal, I started learning how to do transfers.

"I never will forget what a big accomplishment being able to make that first transfer from my wheelchair was. Being able to transfer myself was my first real triumph since the accident."

My next triumph was when I was able to write my own name, since I had limited mobility in my hands. Next, being able to lean over in my wheelchair and being able to pick something up off the floor was my next big accomplishment. When I could pick up my hairbrush, I felt like I was

really getting better. When you lose all your physical abilities, including your bowel functions, and life breaks you down that much, then when you start to have little successes, they become major triumphs.

You appreciate the little triumphs too and start to love them. I developed a love for everything I could do. I feel like even now that I'm always recovering. But, my initial recovery took about 3 years. That's when I began to accept who I was and started participating in wheelchair sports.



Ashleigh wasn't able to do many day-to-day things in rehab, but she pulled herself out of that hole and has accomplished so much since, including becoming a mother!.

One of the major benefits I got from wheelchair sports was that I didn't feel guilty or self conscious for being in a wheelchair and having to rely on others to help me.

Wheelchair sports allowed me to express myself and to regain the personality I'd had before my injury.

I finally loved who I was. My favorite sport was wheelchair rugby, which was one of the few sports that a quadriplegic could do. I had some mentors from the hospital who played wheelchair rugby, and they encouraged me to try the sport. I went to a rugby clinic and fell in love with it. I was able to learn so much from my rugby teammates. Nationally only about six or seven girls played wheelchair rugby, and I was the only girl on my team.

Rugby was challenging enough to allow me to feel like I was really accomplishing my goal of getting better.

The competition was level enough that I didn't feel like I was being overshadowed by the boys. I was a player – I wasn't just a girl or just a quadriplegic. To be honest, I really enjoyed knocking the boys down. When I could knock a guy out of his chair, I really felt awesome. But, most of the time, they knocked themselves over trying to get to me. My being able to snatch the ball away from a guy or passing the ball over his head really made the guys angry, and then they'd come after me. They didn't back off just because I was a girl. The day before I met my husband was the last rugby tournament I ever played.



Ashleigh's Life after Wheelchair Rugby

The main reason I stopped playing wheelchair rugby was because I was really getting involved with my school. I was attending a community college and got my associate degree in physiology. I continued on to receive my bachelor's degree and had a minor in organizational studies.

During that time, I was offered a job by the Arizona Spinal Cord Injury Association, doing information referral. I had already done some volunteer work with them and had been mentored there. So, I accepted the position, thinking I could go to school full time and work for the association full time. But, I was so disorganized at that time that I couldn't keep up with both responsibilities, so I dropped out of school and continued to work with the Spinal Cord Injury Association.

The day I met my husband, Joel, I was shopping for bedroom furniture. He worked at this furniture store and we talked for 4 hours. Joel was one of the easiest people to talk to. Over the next couple of weeks, we both found excuses to call each other. We've been together ever since.

Joel was really fascinated that I was in a wheelchair. Typically, people want to know about my injury, but they're not sure how to ask questions about it because they don't want to pry. But Joel just asked in a matter of fact way, "So, what happened to you? Why are you in a chair?" After I explained my injury to him, I learned later that he went home and learned all he could about spinal cord injuries. Joel was really interested in how my injury affected me and my body, and the amazing thing was he wasn't intimidated or turned off by my problems.

He's one of those rare people who believe life is what it is, and you just accept it and move on from there. Joel always tells me that tomorrow's coming, and we'll get through today.



Ashleigh and her supportive husband, Joel.

Today, Joel and I have been married 2 years, and I had our son last year in February. Fortunately, I had a very easy pregnancy. The only problem I had was that I had low blood pressure. When I told my doctor I wanted to have a baby, she said, "Go for it. Don't let anything hold you back." I was a high risk pregnancy and had placenta previa.

Because I was high risk, my obstetrician decided that the best thing was for me to have a Cesarean section. I had to stay in the hospital a month before the delivery to be monitored every hour before I went into labor. I had to be delivered quickly. When I first saw my little guy, I realized that having him was one of the most beautiful experiences ever. The feelings I had when I first held my Evan were beyond description – what a wonderful moment.



Ashleigh treasures the first moments with her son, Evan.

Evan is doing great now. Joel is the manager for the furniture store, and I work for AdvisaCare as the media manager. I handle their Facebook and Twitter posts, newsletters and website program. I also write their blogs. This company has opened several doors for me.

When I worked at the Arizona Spinal Cord Injury Association in the peer mentoring program, I'd meet with people with spinal cord injuries and help them see what life could be like outside of the hospital. I showed them how I drove my car, and how I could get around and go almost anywhere I wanted to go. I was a paid part time employee.



Ashleigh participates in peer mentor programs to show others with spinal cord injuries how she lived her day to day life.

With the information referral service, I'd find information about programs, assistance and advice that people with spinal cord injuries needed to know. I'd get them information on how to find a van with hand controls and doctors who worked with spinal cord injury patients. I'd also show them the programs available for them, as well as other resources that could help their families. I worked at this job about 3 years.

When the CEO of AdvisaCare learned about what all I'd done at my former job, he asked me to start writing blogs for them and provide the information I'd learned. The good news was that I could do it all from home. I basically taught myself how to build a webpage and how to move items around. I'm sort of feeling my way through social media. After building the blog and beginning to write it, I've continued to learn.

In the future, we may have another child. I'd really love to have a little girl. Don't get me wrong. I love my little boy. In the future, I want to be healthier and participate in endurance races. I'm the vice president of my local chapter of myTeam Triumph, an organization that puts able bodied runners with disabled runners. We often have people with severe cerebral palsy and other major medical problems who run road races teamed with an able bodied athlete. They cross the finish line together.

I coordinate these events, and I hope soon to be participating in 5K races, either with a hand cycle or just hand pushing my wheelchair.



Ashleigh has a bright future ahead for herself and her family.

I've learned that the living of life isn't about surviving a spinal cord injury; it's about how you live with it. I want to try and show people all the things they can do. In the future, I hope to create a more useful and popular blog to help others. I want the blog to be fun, and I want to give the readers of the blog reasons to come back every day.



Connect with Ashleigh Justice via the QuadFiles

*As a 10-year veteran of SCI and TBI, Ashleigh has lived with her injuries (the result of a rollover car accident) since she was 15 and has overcome many challenges, including most recently, becoming a parent. She has spent many years mentoring other people with SCI and has discovered that with the right attitude and the right amount of knowledge, nothing is impossible. Today, Ashleigh writes a blog for brain and spinal cord injured individuals (quadriplegia mainly) called *The QuadFiles*, sponsored by AdvisaCare. It's a compilation of resources, stories and motivations – see www.theQuadfiles.com for details.*

Chapter 9: Share Your Own Story of Reconnecting

Thank you for reading Wheel:Life's second book, *Reconnecting: Relationship Advice from Wheelchair Users*. We hope that some of the individual examples we have shared in the previous chapters have inspired you with new ways you can connect with friends, family and the community around you.

The \$1.99 that you paid for this book is earmarked to fund additional Wheel:Life programs so that we can continue to provide support and resources to the wheelchair community that we serve, worldwide!

However, we realize that if you are reading this book, you may also have a personal story of your own that could help other people who also use wheelchairs. More than likely, many of you have had success in your own relationships, or powerful lessons learned from them, and we hope that more of you will have greater success in relationships after reading our book.

If you'd like to share your own story about a personal relationship to help encourage others, please email the Wheel:Life team at info@wheel-life.org.

If we choose your personal anecdote as an example to use within the next book in this series, we'll send you \$100 that can go toward purchasing your own equipment, medical supplies or medical care. Yes, it's that simple!

So get those ideas down on paper, we're excited to hear about the amazing and unique ways that you have helped yourself or a friend/family member who has a disability.

Thank you again for being part of Wheel:Life! We hope you'll visit our main website at www.wheel-life.org to stay connected and take part in the ongoing free resources that we share daily on the site.



Dedication

This book is dedicated to three people who have been instrumental in creating the Wheel:Life community from the ground up. They've all worked tirelessly, juggling multiple jobs while contributing their time and efforts to help build a place online where friends who use wheelchairs can feel at home.



Amirah & Monica with Thomas Morris at a healthcare conference



Justin runs to raise money to support Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and PTSD in Boston's Race to Home Base.

In between work, family, and life-changing events, they've all lent a bit of their individual personalities to what makes Wheel:Life a special place. As you are finishing this book, I hope you are as happy and proud of their collective effort as I am, for I truly know that our community would shine less brightly if it weren't for their talent radiating within our world.

Monica Manley, Amirah Salim and Justin Racine – thank you from the bottom of my heart! You are all part of the next generation of stars that strive to support others within the disability community, and I can't wait to see how far your limitless gifts and servant-minded spirits will take you.

Matthew 5: 13-16

Join us at www.wheel-life.org.