

Achieving Goals In Spite of a Spinal Cord Injury

By Gene Heppard

I grew up in small town, Peoria, Illinois. Peoria had about a hundred thousand people. Growing up I did not know anybody with any disability. I didn't know anybody with a physical disability, stroke, CP (cerebral palsy), or any thing like that. So all of my friends growing up were all, for a lack of better term, normal. Normal is very relative, and it is a stretch, but we were normal in the sense that all of us had our faculties about us. Ten fingers. Ten toes. We all walked. We all ran.

Nancy and I were high school sweethearts. We graduated in 1990. We never married, but we had our son Mark when we were both juniors in high school. We remained friends, and between the two of us and Nancy's parents, we raised Mark together until I moved to Arizona after high school.

In Arizona and I got a job working in construction, a very physical outdoor job. I was on an apprenticeship program to an electrician. Then I got tired of the heat. Got tired of working outside. My second move was to Colorado. I chose Colorado because my father lived there and we always vacationed there when I was a child. So I grew up snow skiing. I moved to Colorado to turn over a new leaf. I got a job working at a ski resort to pay the bills and to get free skiing. I didn't want to pay the six hundred dollars to get the ski pass. I wanted to get it for free. If you worked part time, you would get the free ski pass.

On Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 1993, I wasn't too busy so I decided to leave work early. I was skiing with my father and ironically enough my best friend from high school who had come out for the winter break to ski. We were skiing down a "green run" in the skiing world, a green run is the beginner run. It was the last run of the day. They closed the runs at four o'clock in Colorado because the mountain is so big and it gets dark so quickly. They don't want people getting lost on the mountains. They could die from the extreme cold.

I hit a tree and broke my neck. At the time, I did not know that I broke my neck. Knocked out. Woke up. Two other skiers I didn't know came down the same path. One stayed with me. One went to go get the ski patrol. In the meantime, my father and best friend, David, redid that run and found me on the side of the hill. When the ski patrol got there, they

recognized me because I worked at the ski resort. They took care of things. When I knew everything was okay, I passed out again.

I woke up three days later in a hospital in Denver, Colorado with a tube in every orifice of my body. Couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe on my own. With all my family there next to me. That is when I began my path in life as a C5 quadriplegic.

Back to working at the ski resort, I always wore my ski clothes because I knew after work I was going to go skiing. That day my father and best friend David met me there. Growing up as a child, we always had the same rule - if you are skiing with somebody and you lose them or they lose you, you take that same run again just in case something happened. Well I had been skiing since I was three years old and when I broke my neck, I was twenty-one. I never had to use that rule before. Never had to go back and take that run again, but I tell you it was ingrained for me at birth and it paid off that one day. And it might have saved my life. I was skiing in the trees where the better snow is. I liked the powder. I noticed that my right ski had popped off, so I looked back behind me to see where my ski was. I knew as soon as I got to a place where I could stop, I was going to have to hike back up to get that ski. When I turned back around, I misgauged how fast I was going. There was a huge pine tree in front of me, I only had a moment to react, and I decided to go forward to hit the pine tree. I hit it with the front of my face. In those days, nobody wore helmets. That wasn't the cool thing to do. I hit the tree and I remember for whatever reason seeing a big flash of light and the purple, white, and yellow. Then I went black.

I woke up. I don't know how much time had passed and I was face up next to the tree. Very quiet. Very peaceful. Very beautiful scenario. I have hit trees before and I thought I pinched a nerve or something but I couldn't feel the rest of my body. I felt like a big head so immediately I knew something was wrong. I didn't panic at first, but I knew something was wrong. Something told me that I had to keep my cool because there was nothing that I could do to get out of this situation. So I started at that moment to make my peace with God. Just in case I wasn't going to make it out of there I said to God - I will never forget what I said - I said, "I want to thank you for how much time I had on this earth and I want to thank you for picking a day that was so beautiful." It was...blue sky. Warm. Not a cloud in the sky, and it was just gorgeous. If I had to leave this earth, this was the way to do it. I prayed, "However, if it is different in your plan for me, I would like to say that if I could see my son one more time and I could see my family one more time. If you will allow me to do this, I will be a better

person, a better Christian and I will be more focused with what is important in life."

At that moment, two skiers came down the trail. One of them ran over me. I didn't feel it, so I knew something was really wrong. I asked him if he could help me out. He asked what was going on. I replied, "I can't feel my body. I think I broke my neck. Could you stay with me and have your buddy go down and get the ski patrol?" He agreed to do that and I got to talk to him a little bit. I had time to get cold. I think shock was setting in. I asked him, "Would you please put your coat over me so that I can stay warm?"

About that time I saw David, my best friend, come walking across the ski hill. He asked, "Gene what is going on?"

I answered, "Hey David, I think I broke my neck. I think I hit this tree pretty hard and I am probably going to have to go to the hospital. Would you do me a favor and tell my dad that I am okay and that the ski patrol is going to be here soon and you know it will be all right?" I saw my dad was approaching and my dad has always had a heart condition. I didn't want my dad to get upset by seeing this. "Just tell him I'm going to be OK."

It started to get dark, the ski patrol got there, and I happened to know the gentleman. He asked, "Hey Gene, what is going on?"

I said, "I broke my neck or I hurt myself."

He said, "We are going to take care of you. We are going to take you down the hill to the clinic."

The last thing I remember saying to him was "Please don't cut my gloves" because the day before I bought some brand new ski gloves and I paid about sixty-five dollars for these things. At the time, that was a lot of money. I just loved the gloves and I had been saving for about six months for these gloves.

He said, "Don't worry Gene we wouldn't cut the gloves."

I wake up three days later. I am in Denver, Colorado and I have tubes in my mouth, in my nose, every other orifice you could think of so I couldn't talk. When I woke up, I noticed my entire family was there. Now I lived in Colorado at this time with my dad. The rest of my family lived in Arizona so for them to be in Colorado I knew I had done something pretty serious. I couldn't talk. I couldn't even cry really, because little did I know at the time that when you break your neck at that level, which was C5, you lose the majority of the muscles in your body. In your stomach specifically so you can't do certain things. There are three muscles that help you breathe. One is the diaphragm. There is a little saying they taught me that day. That C3,

4, and 5 keeps the diaphragm alive. If you have your diaphragm, you can breathe on your own without a tube.

Some days went by and they eventually pulled the tubes out and I could talk. I began to realize that I had broken my neck at C5, which are the fifth cervical vertebrae down. I had cracked cervical four and cervical six. At the time, they ruled out any surgery, but they thought they could fix it so that no more damage would take place.

This was a good hospital. I didn't know anything about neck injuries, but I did find out that Craig Hospital in Colorado has a wonderful program. Craig Hospital is one of the three best hospitals in the world for spinal cord and traumatic brain injury. It just so happened that I was in a good place when I broke my neck. I was in that hospital for probably a week or two before a representative from Craig Hospital came to my room and said, "Gene you have broken you neck at C5. We can rehab you at this hospital but you have to make the choice between Craig Hospital or another hospital."

On December 8 at Craig Hospital I started what I thought was going to be a rehabilitation to get back to walking and normal life again. At twenty-one that is what I had in my mind. That I am going to be better. I will get fixed. As I started rehab I kept passing out. I couldn't stand up or sit up without passing out. The reason was that I had lots of bone fragments in my spinal column that were so painful. My body couldn't feel the pain due to the numbness from the injury. It was making me pass out, so I went in for surgery. It was an eleven hour surgery. They took out all of the bone fragments in my spinal column and they fused with a titanium plate the four, five and six cervical vertebrae together.

So now, I am fused and I can't break my neck there any longer. It is probably stronger than the rest of my body. After that, I rehabbed at Craig Hospital for six months. It was a very intense therapy of learning how to feed myself again. Learning how to brush my own teeth. Learning how to pick up objects with gross motor skills because my hands no longer worked. Learning how to balance. Learning how to eat the right foods. Learning how to dress myself. Learning how to roll over in bed and learning how to get some dignity back. As a twenty-year-old male I longed for some dignity back in my life. Now I was functioning with a major disability. A C5 quadriplegic.

I was able to go home, ironically enough, on April 8, my birthday. I left the hospital and flew to Phoenix, Arizona where, unbeknownst to me, I was now going to live for the next fourteen years of my life. It was scary because it was the first time that I was out of the hospital and I was away

from people who knew how to help me as a quadriplegic and as a spinal cord injury survivor. I moved home. My family had converted their home, a ranch style home so it had ramps for me to get in and out. There was roll-in shower so I could bathe and there were lever door handles. Ones I could use. Ones that I never thought I would need until I became physically disabled. I was at home for the next month. That month turned into a year during which I was sitting in a room with four walls thinking, "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?"

That is when I decided that since I lived right down the road from Mesa Community College that maybe I could take a class. Maybe I could go over there and meet somebody. Maybe I could just go up there and be around other people my own age instead of being at home the rest of my life. Well I went there and I met with Jack Clevenger, who at that time was the manager of the Disability Resource Center. Jack took mom and me into his office and he asked me what I wanted to do.

I said, "I don't know but I think I want to help people. I think I want to work with other people with disabilities because that is who I am." That is what I identified with. So I took classes there for the next three years not knowing what the heck I was doing, but somehow, somehow, I earned 64 credits and got a degree. An AGS (Associate in General Studies).

Ever since my injury I have had home health care attendants who come into my home to assist with dressing and bathing. My future wife Trina started working with me on weekends as an attendant while I was a student at MCC. Soon we began dating. We dated for a year. I proposed to Trina on a trip to the Bahamas. She said yes. We were engaged for a year. We married in 1999, and we are happily married today.

After our marriage I was eating lunch one day out in the Common area at Mesa Community College and I ran into a lady named Judy Taussig. Judy asked, "Gene what are you going to do when you leave here?"

I said, "I don't know."

She said, "Why don't you go get a four-year degree and come back here and be a program advisor?"

I asked, "Would you hire me?"

She said, "Of course we would hire you; you are a very smart individual. You have a good attitude. We would like to have somebody like you around here."

That is when I decided I was going to go to Arizona State University and get a degree. I didn't know what I was going to get a degree in, though. I wheeled onto the campus at ASU, and I tell you what, it changed my life. I

loved that place. I decided to get two degrees, one in communications and one in history.

About two and a half years later, I graduated from ASU. My last course was a summer course in July. I was sitting at home thinking about what to do next because I had spent the last nine years earning degrees. Lo and behold, the phone rings and it is Jack Clevenger. He says, "Gene we need an advisor this summer in the Disability Resource Center because our advisor is out sick." She was pregnant so she was going to be out for maternity leave. He asked me if I was finished with college. I said I finished about a week ago. He says, "Why don't you come in for an interview?"

So I came in. He and Judy Taussig met with me and they said we would like to hire you part time. I said I would love to work part time. That was in July of 2002, so for the next year I worked as a part time advisor in the Disability Resource Center. I learned about what it means to provide accommodations. Now I was on the other side of the desk. Before I was a student getting the accommodations. Now I was the advisor giving the accommodations to the students.

In January of 2003 a job came up at Phoenix College as a manager of a Disability Resource Center. Jack Clevenger and I would eat lunch once or twice a week together. I mentioned it to him. He said, "Gene you might want to put in for that job. If nothing else, you will get the interview experience."

I put in for the job and got a first interview. About three weeks later, I got a call for a second interview. At that second interview, I was offered the position of Disability Manager at Phoenix College. I didn't know what to say. When I left there, I went home, and I told Trina and my parents, and we all started crying. We cried because they were so proud of me. It was the first time in my life that I was given a job based on what I had accomplished through my education and through the skills that I had learned with Jack. So I took the job and I started Cinco de Mayo, May 5 of 2003 at Phoenix College. I am still here to this day helping students and learning and trying to give back to Maricopa Community Colleges what they gave to me for six years - the accommodations, the support, and the education I needed as a person with a physical disability to become financially independent. There was no other way that I could be where I am at today without this education. Without knowledge and education, because I cannot use my physical body like I used to. I cannot go out and be a construction worker. I can't go out and be a ski instructor, but I can use my mind and I can use a computer. I can share my knowledge with people and help people. I can share with

people the importance of an education to work around any disability. We can use the strongest muscle in our bodies - our minds.

If there is any moral to the story, if there is any hope that I can give anybody reading this, it is that through education and learning, much advancement available in life is available and much satisfaction in life is available. We don't have to struggle to make ends meet without a plan. We can plan and use the tools that are given to us by God and use whatever sources of help are available to us. Through hard work and with guidance from other people we can achieve our goals.

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