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# Paralyzed athlete's promise: No self-pity

## Ex-Salpointe gymnast at UA, focused on future

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Andrew Donnellan's favorite time of day is around noon, when the University of Arizona freshman - who goes by "Drew" - is out and about, just another student among the undergraduate crush.

His least favorite time is when he goes to bed. It's then that Donnellan is reminded he'll be captive for the next eight hours.

"It's kind of like being a statue," he says. "Once I'm down I can't move. I'm just stuck there until the morning. That's the worst part of my day."

That admission is the extent of negativity one gets when speaking with Donnellan, a former elite high school athlete paralyzed from the chest down in 2006 during a gymnastics practice session. Whining just isn't in the 18-year-old's nature.

"I just kinda do what I do," he says. "I don't think about it because I think if you stop and think about it, you might, like, psych yourself out. . . . You just gotta kinda go with the flow - let it come through you, I guess."

So Donnellan thinks about the good in today, which includes a scholarship to attend UA from the University of Southern California Physically Challenged Athletes Scholarship Fund.

"When an athlete's injured like this, you lose a lot of self-esteem," says Ron Orr, USC associate athletic director and co-founder of the scholarship. "But we found once we get them on campus, they learn to take care of themselves and they see, 'Hey I can re-create a new future for myself.'"

Donnellan sees a future making movies, making friends and - sooner rather than later - learning to drive.

Using his shoulder muscles, Donnellan pushes forward his right arm and his right hand - curled slightly by his quadriplegia - sliding them along the armrest of his electric wheelchair. He pushes the joystick, making his chair turn in a circle, smiling broadly.

In that moment, Donnellan looks like thousands of other college freshmen, sporting the anything-is-possible attitude that is the special purview of the young.

### **A routine exercise leads to injury**

On May 12, 2006, Donnellan walked onto a tumbling mat at Tucson's Gymnastics World and did a single front flip, a move he'd done daily for seven years.

But that day, the 16-year-old Salpointe Catholic High School sophomore over-rotated and, in less time than it

takes to give your best friend a high-five, fractured two vertebrae and damaged his spinal cord.

"I have been coaching since 1974 and seen bad falls, but I could tell right away this was more serious," said Yoichi Tomita, the co-owner of Gymnastics World and Donnellan's coach. "I heard a sound of his head going to the floor and raced to him. I helped him to slow his breath, then I pinched his leg and said, 'Do you feel that,' and he didn't. . . . You know, it was two years ago, but I remember it vividly like yesterday."

Donnellan underwent emergency surgery at University Medical Center, then was transferred to Craig Hospital, a internationally known spinal-cord injury treatment facility in Englewood, Colo., for about three months.

His mother, Fran Donnellan, stayed with him. Volunteers in Tucson worked to renovate their home, making it disabled-accessible. A special fund was created, from which his mother still draws to pay for her son's various needs that are not covered by insurance.

Drew Donnellan returned to Salpointe that fall to cheers from the entire student body. He graduated with his class last May.

### **Volunteers help with class notes**

Donnellan is majoring in media arts with a psychology minor at UA.

"I don't want to get into the whole Hollywood thing," he explained. "More like independent, smaller films. But I still want to make money."

He received a \$2,000 UA merit award based on his high grades at Salpointe and the USC scholarship covers the remainder of his expenses.

His UA home is a single-occupant dorm room equipped with a roll-in shower and doors wide enough for his wheelchair. His mom had a lift installed to help caregivers move him from his wheelchair to his bed and back again.

He's enrolled in five classes, his favorite a philosophy class titled "Justice and Virtue." Volunteer note-takers help in two of his classes and Forest Melton, Donnellan's weekday caregiver and one of his closest friends, takes notes in the other three.

Donnellan either dictates his homework to a rotating cadre of three evening caregivers or uses Dragon Naturally Speaking, a voice-activated computer program that frustrates him because it makes so many mistakes.

Donnellan depends on his caregivers to take him any place he can't get to via his wheelchair. But like any 18-year-old, he craves the freedom to go where he wants, when he wants.

So he's taking driving lessons from Jenny Nordine of Driving To Independence, a Phoenix-based training school for special-needs drivers.

Donnellan can't grip with his hands - or feel them - and has to use muscles in his shoulders, upper chest, back and abdomen to push his arms and hands.

To drive the van, Donnellan maneuvers his left hand on a joystick that both accelerates and brakes the vehicle, while simultaneously steering with his right hand by rotating a small wheel connected to his wheelchair.

On a recent Thursday, he inched through the parking lot at Hi Corbett Field, topping out at 15 miles per hour.

"Driving with these controls is a lot like tapping your head and rubbing your tummy," Nordine said. "It is the most difficult system to learn."

Donnellan won't have another lesson until January because Nordine has determined he needs more strength to operate the controls.

Which is where Chris Litten, a personal trainer from BodyBasics, 7355 N. Oracle Road, comes in. Donnellan works out with Litten twice a week and the trainer is confident Donnellan will be able to drive.

"His desire to continue to improve, to push the boundaries of what he can do, is inspiring," Litten said. "When we started in February, he couldn't hold the medicine ball and now he can hold it and lift it nearly to his chin by contracting his chest muscles so his arms and hands push in on the ball. He doesn't think about what he can't do, only what he wants to do."

### **First steps at independent living**

When Donnellan entered Craig Hospital, the only thing he could do independently was breathe. He moved his wheelchair by blowing into a plastic straw. He couldn't feed himself; he couldn't hold himself up in his chair.

Slowly, he was able to make small movements with his arms and lift his hands an inch off the bed. He eventually regained some muscle movement and was able to use a joystick to control the chair.

A few weeks before his return to Tucson, Donnellan got activation in his right biceps muscle. Therapists had lifted him out of the aquatic-therapy pool and put him into his wheelchair. His right arm fell off his armrest and, without much thought, he lifted it back up.

"I was like, 'Oh, hey, look what I can do,'" Donnellan recalled. "Then after a few more months, I got a little wrist movement in my right wrist, but not much and that's been it."

Since returning home and working with Litten, Donnellan has gained the ability to sit upright, unassisted, for 35 minutes on a workout bench.

He said he doesn't think he'll gain any more function in his hands, but wants to keep getting stronger where he can so he can be independent.

"I'm just like everyone - you don't want someone to have to be with you all the time," he said. "It makes you feel good about yourself to know you can do stuff for yourself."

Donnellan got some practice in independent living this summer when he spent time at a Rhode Island summer camp for people with disabilities.

"It was a really, really cool program. There were 11 other people in wheelchairs and we did all these things - sailing, swimming, a Red Sox game, a rope swing . . . but the best thing is that you pick each other's brains," he said. "This one guy showed me how to eat pizza and sandwiches by balancing them on my hand. It got me ready to live down here. It was like the transition to college."

### **Entering UA 'pure joy' for mom**

Fran Donnellan, a social worker and executive director of Atria Campana del Rio retirement community, adopted Drew as an infant, making "an active choice" to become a single mother. He'd been abandoned on the doorway of a church hostel in Jamaica, where she was in the Peace Corps.

She has had to accept that her son - once one of the most powerful gymnasts in Tucson - will never walk again and watch as he struggled to learn to feed himself with special utensils that hook into a hand brace. Watching her son enter UA, she said, is "pure joy."

"I'm so proud of him," she explained. "It's taken everything he's got to make this happen. There's nothing easy about being paralyzed, but Drew has not let it get in his way. He's gone through an incredible transition, being paralyzed at 16, graduating high school, going to college, living in a dorm. I give him all the credit."

But she still worries, especially about the times Drew is without a caregiver - weeknights after 11 and long stretches during the weekend days.

Drew Donnellan has the accessory no college student could live without - a cell phone - and activates his Bluetooth earpiece by swinging his right arm sideways toward his head to push the "on" button with the side of his hand.

It's his lifeline to his friends, his mom and his caregivers, but it isn't foolproof.

Fran Donnellan said that Drew once had a spasm - common to those with spinal cord injuries - and fell forward in his wheelchair against his laptop, trapping his right arm. He stayed that way for three hours until a caregiver arrived. He never told his mother.

"I found out from his caregiver," she explained. "When I asked Drew why he didn't tell me, he said he didn't want me to worry. When I asked him how he survived those three hours, he said, 'It's over with, Mom.'"

Drew Donnellan describes his relationship with his mom as "pretty close" but also "pretty normal."

"Sometimes I'm like, 'Get off my back, Mom,' just like any kid my age," he said with a chuckle. "I know she has legitimate reason to worry, but I'm OK."

### **No 'what ifs' to cloud his future**

Life at college has been an adjustment, but mostly in a good way, he said. He learned how to operate the elevator controls, something he couldn't do before, and he loves being away from regimented high school schedules.

He doesn't really have a social life yet, but is considering joining a Methodist campus ministry at UA and possibly the UA Adaptive Athletics quad-rugby team.

"I've pushed a quad chair," he said. "I'm not very fast, but I can push it. I think it might be fun."

When asked what he sees in his future, Donnellan gets quiet and pauses for a minute.

"I don't think I'll get married unless, I guess, I find the right person," he said. "But I would like to travel a little, to Europe, maybe Asia. I want to find my path here, to know exactly what I want to do in media, and I want to make good, lifelong friends."

What his future doesn't hold, Donnellan said, is dwelling in the past amid a litany of "what ifs."

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"Everyone has times when they're sad," he said. "When it happens, I mostly go outside and think about it and kinda work it out in my head. . . . I mean, you gotta go through what you gotta go through. For me, it just happened to be this."

## **Scholarship fund**

Andrew Donnellan is one of 33 current recipients of a University of Southern California Physically Challenged Athletes Scholarship. The scholarship fund was created in 1981 after a motorcycle accident paralyzed All-American USC swimmer Mike Nyeholt and a fundraising event brought in more money than expected.

Since then, annual "Swim With Mike" events across the nation have raised more than \$8.7 million to fund 77 full-ride college scholarships for student-athletes overcoming life-challenging accidents or illnesses. Tucson's Joe Kay, a senior at Stanford University, is a recipient, and Kay's mother informed Fran Donnellan of the scholarship so her son could apply.

## **If you want to help**

If you'd like to donate to The Andrew Donnellan Recovery Fund, contact any Wells Fargo Bank. The account number is 2552379782.

**Caption:** Andrew "Drew" Donnellan takes Wickett, one of his three dogs, to the Reid Park dog park in his electric wheelchair.

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