



Bright Light Foundation

Dan Dickerson

2010 BLF Recipient



As Susan Dickerson watched her husband Dan and their 12-year-old twin sons carry their bags into the airport on the morning of February 22, 2009, she imagined that a week of skiing would be a kind of father-son bonding trip for them. No one imagined that Dan would not be able to walk back through those airport doors. No one imagined that he would be in Colorado for nearly four more months learning to live without walking, without being able to move anything from his mid-chest down.

Truly a freak accident

Dan was an accomplished skier. He could handle the toughest runs at Breckenridge – where they were. But he was on a beginner run with his boys when he hit a root, lost control and crashed headfirst into a tree. The impact broke his C6 and C7 vertebrae. As he lay in the snow, still conscious but bleeding and unable to move, he reassured his sons. “He kept telling us not to worry,” Patrick said. “He kept telling us how proud he is of us,” said Ryan. Dan was diagnosed a C-5 quadriplegic, meaning all limbs are affected. Skiing accidents of this severity are rare. Skiing accidents of this severity for a seasoned skier on a kids’ run are almost unheard of.

Always active - Always quick to lend a hand

Dan was never one to sit around. He was passionate about outdoor sports. As a mountain biker in New Orleans, he spearheaded construction of the first “single track” mountain bike trail in the New Orleans area – through the

Bonnet Carré spillway.

As an engineer, when Katrina struck and shut down area refineries, he went back to work within days – touring the plants, assessing the damage and assisting with their reopening. When neighborhood kids needed a baseball coach, he stepped up to the plate. And now, someone who has always been so quick to lend a hand to others can barely move his own hands. Someone who always enjoyed helping others found himself in need of help from others.

Dan’s family

Of course, Dan is not the only one whose life was changed that day. Dan’s wife, Susan, is a real estate agent, but now she has a different calling: helping Dan in his physical and emotional progress. They are learning together how to adapt to their new life including wheelchairs, voice activated computer software and how to adapt their home to meet the needs of someone with Dan’s physical limitations. After the accident, the twins, Patrick and Ryan, returned to Metairie to continue school at St. Catherine of Siena. The faculty, staff and students there worked tirelessly to help the boys feel safe and secure in their new circumstances. For as long as the boys can remember, their dad taught them to challenge themselves both mentally and physically. Now their greatest challenge is how to adopt their dad’s persistent “can do” spirit and his positive attitude.

"Relearning" how to live

The immediate issues at hand for Dan and his family are living arrangements and the specialized and very expensive adaptive equipment that Dan requires because of his condition. The family is in the midst of building a new house with the necessary accessibility features. While that's progressing, Dan continues to go to physical therapy and is slowly gaining strength and coordination. Dan's goal right now is to gain enough strength to be more independent and to relearn how to drive – these "sub-goals" are part of Dan's ultimate goal of returning to work.