

After Spinal-Cord Injury, 'Protect and Serve' Takes New Shape

By Patricia McMorrow

Jeff Edwards of Herman, MN, fell from roofs and crashed dirt bikes as a kid, parachuted into dangerous places with the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division and faced potential harm for 13 years as a Grant County sheriff's deputy and SWAT-team marksman. Breaking his neck in shallow water while on vacation in Mexico in 2015 was not something Jeff had ever imagined. "It was just a freak accident," he said. "I got rolled by a wave and hit the crown of my head on the bottom of the ocean ... instantly paralyzed." Jeff said he remembers thinking, "All the dangerous and dumb things I have done in my life, and a wave takes me out?"

After a medical evacuation—securing an air ambulance that required up-front payment of \$30,000 became longtime girlfriend Dani Murdoff's first act as a caregiver—Jeff had surgery at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis to stabilize his spinal cord. Then, he set his first goal: going home.

"I hated being in the hospital," Jeff said. "They said I would have to be there for at least three months, and then I would be in [physical] rehab for six months." But after just one month, he was transferred to the Spinal Cord Injury & Disorder Center at the Minneapolis VA Health Care System. Although Jeff had earned an Honorable Discharge from the Army in 1999 and his injury was not service-related, he was eligible for treatment as a Catastrophically Disabled Veteran.

Doctors at the VA also thought it would take six months for Jeff to master a wheelchair, bathe, dress, cook and learn to drive with hand-controls. Throughout the time that Jeff was in the hospital and in physical rehab 170 miles from home, Dani used CaringBridge to keep family and friends updated on his progress. Jeff said, "The best thing I had in the hospital was the CaringBridge site. Dani would show me the comments; it was so motivating. I was a small-town police officer, and you don't always feel well-liked ... then you see what people write, and it just totally changes your attitude and motivation to get better and get back home to see everybody."



In just three months and 10 days, Jeff had "checked all the boxes" of self-sufficiency. When he was finally able to return home, his family, friends and law enforcement community rallied around him as he began to figure out what would come next.

While Jeff was in the hospital, Dani put the two-story house they had been restoring up for sale and started making plans for to build a place with an open floor plan and no stairs. Next on the to-do list was a new line of work. "Obviously, I couldn't be a law enforcement officer," Jeff said. "You have to be able to chase the bad guys."

Through the VA and Paralyzed Veterans of America, Jeff landed a work-at-home job with a computer-storage company based in New York. He wanted to quit on Day 2. "It was completely different from what I was used to, and way out of my knowledge base," he said. "But I'm not much of a quitter, so I figured I would give it a week ... and within the first month I started catching on."

Although "not a quitter" sums up so much, Jeff said he still thinks about the day his life "went from 60 mph to 0 mph, in no time flat." "Every day there are 'what-ifs,'" he said. "I think, 'What if I had just hung out at the pool that day? Or gone across the street to shop? Or had not even gone on vacation?' How different my life would be."

While he said he feels entitled to those thoughts, Jeff won't let them take over. He also refuses to be consumed by anger. "So many guys with injuries like this are angry with the world," Jeff said. "But I look at it like, 'This was my fault ... something I did to myself.' Granted, nature had a little hand in it, but I made the decisions that led up to what happened."

When Jeff has been asked to talk with other service members who have been paralyzed, he said he always tries to focus on the positive. "Don't get me wrong: I get frustrated," he said. "It's hard to deal with, but I still try to do the better thing."

Dani describes it this way: **"I think you just have to have the mentality that this is what you have been dealt; you have to deal with it as it comes. It wouldn't have done Jeff any good if we didn't take a high road. So that's just what we needed to do."**

What remains difficult for a sheriff's deputy and Army veteran trained to protect and serve is being on the receiving end of help. "Learning how to say, 'yes' to help was very, very hard. And it still is," Jeff said. "But I am getting a little better."

Life offers many opportunities to practice. Jeff is handy—a look at his garage workshop gives him away—so talking son Jake through repairs beyond his reach offers an exercise in bonding and patience for a man used to being very independent.

He also enjoys hunting and fishing, which remain possible thanks to an all-terrain wheelchair purchased through a GoFundMe campaign launched by friends.

Being outdoors and doing activities he loves are good for Jeff's soul, although having to depend on Dani or daughter Briana to load the track-chair onto its trailer is yet another reminder of how life has changed.

Reconciling the before-and-after like this is at the core of Jeff's healing process.

For Jeff, healing is a mix physical and mental. And while he does not pretend to have all the answers, he has this advice for others: "For me to heal, I had to push myself. Maybe you're not going to be 100%, but you're going to be at 100% of what you are capable of at a time.

The stronger you can stay mentally, the better off you will be as a person. Try to do the best you can, with what you have. That's what healing means to me."

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

Army veteran Jeff Edwards' story is part of How We Heal, an ongoing series produced by the global nonprofit social network CaringBridge.

To help ensure that patients and family caregivers like Jeff and Dani don't go through health journeys alone, CaringBridge is working with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to offer veterans, service members and caregivers a safe online place to connect. Learn more at <https://military.caringbridge.org/a/>

