

Getting Back Up

Scott Fedor, MBA '04, charts a new course after a devastating spinal cord injury

When Scott Fedor, MBA '04, dropped off pants at a dry cleaners prior to the July Fourth holiday in 2009, "I took for granted that I would wear them to my next sales meeting." Instead, they are a portal to another life that remained unclaimed for three years. The man who planned everything found life had a different plan.

That weekend, Fedor decided to go for a quick swim upon arriving at a family cottage. But he misjudged the water depth and dove headfirst into the lake's bottom. He laid face down in 33 inches of water, unable to move. "I prayed and swallowed as much water as I could, to die quickly," he says.

The marketing VP at a Berkshire Hathaway company had risen through the corporate ranks, and enjoyed challenges ranging from riding bulls to tackling Michigan's Evening MBA Program in order to get the most out of his life and career. But then he found himself with a neck broken at the C3 level.

"When I came out of the coma, I didn't want to live," Fedor says. Doctors said he would never again breathe on his own, feed himself, or walk, and the young manager faced his toughest decision — live or die. "When given the choice, I was surprised how easy it was to decide to go on, despite my living death sentence."

Fedor channeled his energy into recovering and spent 20 months in hospitals and rehab, pushing the boundaries of physical therapy. But he also faced mental and emotional struggles. "I still don't understand why this happened. The emotional impact never goes away, but it changes," he says.

Fedor defied the odds by breathing and eating on his own. He lives in an apartment with round-the-clock care and uses voice-activated software to email, blog (one entry about meeting **Bruce Springsteen** got 56,000 hits), and more. And he's focused on marketing a new product — hope. Fedor had always enjoyed infusing positive messages into presentations, and collected inspirational quotes and stories. He also was comfortable with public speaking. So when he was asked to detail his recovery at a spinal cord injury symposium, he agreed.



"Getting myself straight mentally and emotionally helped me physically. I wanted to share that message."

Fedor now is booked regularly for engagements at schools, hospitals, churches, businesses, and civic groups. His injury has taught him ways to help people that he says he otherwise wouldn't have understood. But he shrugs off the "inspiring" label. "To inspire is to cause someone to act. People might be moved by my story, but does it cause them to do something differently in their own lives? My hope is that it does."

Fedor also is raising awareness of spinal cord injuries (SCI) and difficulties facing survivors. In 2011, he launched Getting Back Up, a foundation dedicated to increasing survivors' quality of life, since insurance often doesn't cover aggressive, exercise-based therapy programs or voice-activated software. "Little things can make a huge difference — physically, mentally, and emotionally," says Fedor.

Through the foundation, he is developing an independent-living facility ("The Quad") for quadriplegics. The Quad will foster a sense of comfort and camaraderie not available in many nursing facilities, and also will allow residents to share expenses. "Many SCI survivors are young, yet relegated to elder-care homes," Fedor says. "We need an alternative for vibrant people who want to contribute to society."

The project harks back to Fedor's previous work. "We must effectively market the Quad and set the strategy," he says. "Then we'll manage the idea sustainably. It reminds me of case studies at Michigan."

While he's not a "Pollyanna," Fedor says the accident has made him more appreciative of tiny joys — from laughing with friends to feeling the sun on his face. His life might not be following the course he mapped out, but he's making the most of new opportunities.

"I used to wake up in the morning and think, 'I can't move.' Now my first thought is that it's time to get going. I get as much done as I did before the accident. I just do it differently."

Learn more about Fedor at www.scottwefedor.com. ✪

—Amy Spooner