A Triumph of Spirit

Daniel Tull was told by the physicians he would never walk again. Daniel didn’t believe them.

Thirteen years ago, a logging accident nearly killed Daniel Tull. Although he was lucky to survive, he was confined to a wheelchair with spinal damage, crushed hips and knees, facial disfigurement and brain injuries.

“It was a freak accident,” Daniel, age 55, explains. “I had an 85-foot maple come down and hit me on top of the hard hat. It shattered my hard hat. Fortunately, I was bent over with one arm extended with my power saw, so I collapsed. Otherwise, it would have killed me instantly.”

As it was, his injuries were extensive: “I damaged two discs in my lower back. My spinal cord was disjointed and the soft tissue that connects the vertebrae was severely damaged causing a rotation in them and a pinching of the two discs. A disc in my mid-back was ruptured and deflated. A disc in my cervical spine was totally decimated, it was disintegrated. My hips were torn apart, my knees were ripped apart and crushed by the weight of the tree as it fell on me. My face was disfigured from the blows it sustained on impact. My nose was ripped off; my lips were both split; one was ripped off; my teeth were all knocked out. I had brain damage to my motor senses and that has been, and is yet today, something that I struggle with,” Daniel explains.

“He was told by the physicians he would never walk again. To get that out of his head,” Daniel’s wife, Deborah Casey Tull says.

“And that was real to them,” Daniel continues. “Those injuries would dictate that. Most people would not be able to overcome that.” But Daniel did.

He’s not fully recovered; every day is a step in that direction. And Daniel just wants to do what he’s always done – work.

“Doctors termed me super tenacious, because I’m a very optimistic person,” Daniel says. “Three times I was disabled and classified disabled fully, and three times I worked back from those assorted injuries and found myself working full time again.”

His 1997 accident was different. “They deemed me un-trainable and convinced me I was to ever remain in that position, that I would never work again,” Daniel says.

Although he accepted the fact that he may never work again, spending the rest of his life in a wheelchair was not an option. When he first met Deborah, he was laboring through the slow process of rebuilding his body. From the wheelchair to crutches to canes, Daniel was eventually able to build the strength needed to support his weight and stand. Now, he can even take walks with his wife of six years.

Some might think that would be enough for a man who is lucky to be alive. But when Daniel spotted an ad promoting Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College’s Therapeutic Massage program, a dream began building. He could get an education and work again.

“I wasn’t familiar with the trade at all,” Daniel says. “But with my wife’s encouragement we decided that we would do this together.’”

The pair attend classes full time, while Deborah maintains her business full time. Plus, the couple is in the midst of major remodeling of their rural Washburn home. Finances have been an issue, but the Tulls have found a way to make ends meet.

Deborah has raised and butchered chickens for the last 30 years. “With Daniel’s disability there was really nothing out there that he could pick but felt she was missing something. “I’m returning to something that really fits to my heart,” she says. “And that’s working with the complementary and alternative sorts of healthcare. I’ve always had this struggle with, ‘Yeah I have a great job, but I’m really not helping anyone.’”

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Therapeutic Massage

Photo courtesy of Deborah Casey Tull.

sensitivity that can only come through experience, according to their instructor Becky Sue Neilon. “Daniel and Deb have been assets to the program because they have been through a remarkable healing process in Daniel’s body,” says Neilon. “That allows them to have a deep degree of empathy for those who are dealing with tissue damage and aches and pains – anything from ankle sprains to disability.”

Their education has ignited a passion to build a business based on serving the wellness needs of others. And it almost seems like destiny. When they planned a sauna and large soaking tub in their home remodel, they had no idea that it may one day be part of their business.

“They’ll be potentially pieces we can offer to others as a part of their treatment,” Deborah says. She is also studying nutrition as a facet of their future practice. They would also like to create a collaboration with other wellness practitioners in the region. “We are not sure how everything will unfold but we have these spaces that are beautifully designated for certain types of treatment. It’s like our minds and hearts set in this naturally.”

“We talk to each other about the reality of being massage therapists,” Daniel says. “And we feel between the two of us we can ‘open shop’ so to speak and manage a pretty steady living from it. We hope that I can work my way off of social security, that I can maintain an income high enough to be deemed working again. That’s my goal in this.”

Daniel realizes that, because of the physical demands of being a massage therapist, working full time may not be a reality. “I have to accommodate the problems I have in my spine with some mechanical adjustments,” Daniel says. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to work a whole day in a therapy position, but I feel that if I can work part time every day, that’s more than enough for me to be considered full-time, again and that’s what I’m working toward.”

Daniel feels this is all meant to be. “If I was still in a wheelchair, I’d still be looking for some kind of education, something I could do that would benefit others in some way,” Daniel says. “But as it is, I stand on my feet and I found a program that has given to me quite a bit of hope. I really do think that I’m moving in the right direction right now.”

“You know the one thing that has repeated itself through my life so far is the worst things that have ever happened to me, to us, have been the catalyst for the best things that were to come,” Deborah says. “For both Daniel and me, both our lives have changed dramatically out of no choice of our own. The process of the second half of our lives is turning out to be far more beautiful and far more productive and far more hopeful than either of us either could have imagined.”

To learn more about the Therapeutic Massage program go to witc.edu/programs or call 800.243.9482.

When David Wroblewski began to pen his debut novel, “The Story of Edgar Sawtelle,” he didn’t even know if he would be published. Certainly, he could not have fathomed the breakthrough success – being selected for Oprah’s Book Club, praise from big authors like Stephen King, rave reviews from critics, weeks on New York Times’ bestseller list and 18-months of book promotion tours – the novel would bring.

His ascent to fame is just one topic for discussion when Wroblewski speaks at WITC-Ashland at 6 p.m., Thursday, April 22. The community book discussion will be broadcast via IP Video to WITC’s New Richmond, Rice Lake and Superior campuses as well.

The critically acclaimed “The Story of Edgar Sawtelle” introduces readers to a mute boy born into a family of dog breeders. Raised on a farm in the small town of Mellen, Wis., the boy’s peaceful life becomes suddenly chaotic when his father dies and his uncle attempts to assume his father’s role at the farm and in the family.

“I began the book in the mid-1990s as a purely personal project,” Wroblewski says. “I knew most of the basics of the story from the beginning: the farm setting, the dogs, Edgar’s muteness, the basic structure of the story. The writing, though, proceeded tentatively – we’re talking years of bumbling and exploration before I figured certain things out. That didn’t especially worry me. I’d told myself the writing could take as long as it needed to take.”

Although he had a basic idea where the book would take place, he hadn’t discovered the specific location. A camping trip not only gave him the perfect locale, but seeded the beginnings of a friendship with a local family as well.

“I was camping at Copper Falls for a couple of weeks,” Wroblewski says. “I came into Mellen and visited the Town Hall, which contained not only the Historical Society, but also the library. They had both volumes of “A Journey Into Mellen,” that wonderful compiled history of the town. At the front of Volume 1 was an introduction by the man who was obviously the driving force behind the books – Joe Barabe. Anyone who has read Edgar’s story will understand why I was so charmed by that introduction: it involved the ghost of Sam Bennett sitting down next to Joe and asking, ‘How’s the book coming?’ By the time I headed home, I was sure that the Sawtelles lived in the hills north of Mellen.”

Years later, when the book was scheduled to be published, Wroblewski contacted Barabe, who is also the mayor of Mellen, to let him know the small town of Mellen would be featured in his novel. Months later, the two authors met in person as Wroblewski accompanied Oprah’s camera crew to Mellen.

“Joe has been a great help to me in understanding not just Mellen as it is today, but Mellen as it used to be,” Wroblewski says. “His knowledge of the town seems bottomless.”

Barabe’s wife, Dee, works at WITC-Ashland’s Learning Resource Center and invited Wroblewski to speak at the campus while he promotes the book in Wisconsin. In addition, Dee and other LRC staff encouraged student government bodies at each of the four campuses to purchase copies of “The Story of Edgar Sawtelle” for students. The author will host a student discussion that will also be broadcast to all four WITC campuses prior to the community book discussion that evening.

Wroblewski hopes to keep both discussions open. “I’m planning to read a brief passage or two from the book, and I’ll give some brief backstory on the writing,” Wroblewski says. “But mainly I want to have an open-ended discussion driven by audience questions. In my experience, that’s always the most fun for everyone involved.”

The community book discussion is free and open to the public. For details about Wroblewski’s book discussion at your local WITC campus, go to witc.edu/news.