

## Spinal Cord Injury Inspires Executive to Help Others

*Foundation Has Raised \$1M Since Founder's Motorcycle Accident*

BY MARION WEBB

Eric Northbrook's life was forever changed the day he suffered a spinal cord injury on Jan. 27, 2006. Today, the now 42-year-old founder of the Del Mar-based HeadNorth Foundation raises funds to support people with spinal cord injuries and for spinal cord research.

He has little recollection of the accident other than losing control of his motorcycle while driving on a dirt trail in Baja California, Mexico. He recalls, however, being conscious during the eight-hour transport, which required being duct-taped to the tailgate of a truck and riding in three ambulances. The journey would end in the trauma unit at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, one of six Scripps Health hospitals.

Then came the diagnosis: "I had severed my spinal cord at T7 (seventh thoracic spinal nerve), broken 10 ribs, my right scapula, fractured C2, C3 and C4 (cervical vertebra 2, 3, 4) and had a skull fracture," Northbrook recalled.

The accident left him paralyzed from the chest down, but his head remains raised high into the sky. During his initial 35-day hospital stay, Northbrook was determined to not make the accident about him, but rather to seek out the greater good.

Northbrook started HeadNorth Foundation a month after his accident in 2006 with his "eternal best friend," as he refers to Steve Rosetta, executive director at the University City office of real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield Inc. Rosetta is the president of HeadNorth, which occupies donated space at Cushman & Wakefield's University City office, where both Northbrook and Rosetta work.

Thus far, the foundation's executive director, Randal Schober, is the only full-time employee supported by two full-time volunteers.

Northbrook spends 40 to 50 hours per week on his job as executive director at Cushman & Wakefield to "put food on the table," and devotes five to eight hours weekly to "meet and greet with potential donors and friends in corporate America."

Since 2006, the local foundation has raised more than \$1 million from organized events, corporate sponsors, private donations and partnerships. Northbrook declined to name the large donors. The monies have benefited 15 to 20 people with spinal cord injuries and the UC San Diego School of Medicine, which Northbrook presented with a \$50,000 check last year to fund spinal cord research.

### **Fund-Raising Goals**

This year, Northbrook aims to raise \$1 million, earmarking half for HeadNorth's Response One Application Program that helps fund spinal cord injury-related expenses. The program assists acutely injured individuals who can apply online for \$1,000 and people in the recovery and rehabilitation stages who may be faced with converting a home or vehicle for accessibility, or the purchase of speech software to be able to communicate.



The other 50 percent raised this year will fund local spinal cord research, in particular the Burnham Institute for Medical Research and UCSD, which is gearing up for a new study that will cost about \$350,000 a year, Northbrook said.

“Presently, we are seeking corporate donations to fund the program,” he said.

Attempts to reach the UCSD doctor involved in the study were unsuccessful. Northbrook, however, said details of the study will likely be published this summer.

According to the national Spinal Cord Injury Information Network, between 225,000 and 300,000 people in the United States now live with a spinal cord injury, and about 12,000 new cases occur each year. The most common causes of spinal cord injury are motor vehicle crashes (42 percent), falls (27 percent), acts of violence (15 percent) and sports injuries (7 percent).

First-year post-injury costs can be “astronomical,” Northbrook said.

Statistics cited average first-year costs of \$270,913 for a paraplegic; about \$417,000 for a quadriplegic. Northbrook considers himself fortunate that he had so many friends, family and real estate colleagues rallying around him.

“I am lucky enough financially that I didn’t require all of the support that family and friends were willing to give me,” he said.

He estimated his own first-year expenses to reach \$250,000, including \$125,000 to convert his Olivenhain home, where he lives with his wife of 15 years, Denise, and their two children Justin, 8, and Sydney, 6.

Schober noted that home conversion costs, including widening doors to provide wheelchair access, installing ramps and remodeling bathrooms, can quickly add up to \$175,000 or more.

Claudia Obertreis, HeadNorth’s secretary and president of the Kearny Mesa-based Ability Center, a privately held mobility firm providing products such as vans and wheelchairs to physically challenged people, agrees the price tag for the freedom of mobility can be costly.

She first met Northbrook in September of 2006. He had just returned to San Diego after spending four and a half months at Craig Hospital in Denver, a premier spinal cord rehabilitation center, and was ready to install hand controls in his car.

“He asked me to be on the board (of HeadNorth) because of my background and I find its mission fits well with the vision and mission of the Ability Center,” Obertreis said.

### **Expansion Plans**

By 2011, Schober hopes to expand HeadNorth foundations to Orange County and San Francisco, respectively.

“Spinal injury can happen to anyone,” Schober said. But it doesn’t mean the end of a full and active life. Northbrook models this by working hard, and enjoying family and friends as well as ski trips at his vacation home in Park City, Utah.

Northbrook also enjoys golf and is hoping to raise \$300,000 at this year’s third annual Golf Invitational at The Crosby in Rancho Santa Fe. That amount is up from \$250,000 last year.

“The spinal cord community needs financial help. There is no other way to say it,” he said.

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