

Can't keep this Paralympian down: A 'moving' story of hope-Local author-bicyclist to speak at Wings of Hope for Pancreatic Cancer Research benefit

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To hear Tricia Downing tell it, the worst thing about living as a paraplegic might just be the cluelessness of complete strangers.

"I was grocery shopping one day," she said. "I grabbed some spinach off the shelf and turned around to get my next item, and this woman said, 'You're so inspiring!'"

"Because I got the spinach?"

Even more bemusing have been the shoppers who somehow see retail as a safe space to shop for information: "What happened to you?" they sometimes query.

The answers that Downing gives vary when those wheels — the ones in her head — start turning.

"It depends on what kind of mood I'm in. There are times when I've made stuff up," she said with a smile. "I have friends who are amputees, who will say 'shark attack' just for fun."

Downing, who was paralyzed from her chest down when a car crashed into her fast-moving bicycle nearly two decades ago, has gotten used to what has become her "new" — now aging — "normal." Although the 49-year-old southeast Denver woman admittedly spends many of her waking hours in a wheelchair, she is anything but "confined" to it.

She drives. She travels the world. She is a champion Paralympian bicycle racer.

"I've surprised myself in the fact that I've become hyper motivated to achieve any goal I set," Downing said. "I was motivated before [the crash], but I think I've become even more motivated. If there's something I want to do, I don't think twice about it."

Even Downing has limits, however.

"I can't change a light bulb," she joked. "I don't like to be cold, so I choose not to ski. I don't like to cook, but I do cook. I clean, reluctantly."

Meanwhile, Downing is director of Camp Discovery, which offers adaptive fitness to women in wheelchairs. Her memoir, *Cycle of Hope — A Journey from Paralysis to Possibility*, was published in 2010.

The author and athlete will deliver the keynote address at An Evening of Hope, a benefit for the nonprofit Wings of Hope for Pancreatic Cancer Research, on Saturday, Nov. 17, at Anschutz Medical Campus at the University of Colorado Cancer Center.

"I'm sure there's a completely different mindset that I can't reach or understand," Downing said of those suffering from pancreatic cancer. "But I can speak to the way you look at your challenges and the attitude you bring to fighting them."

Cycle of life

In one respect, little has changed for Tricia Downing in the last 18 years. On Sept. 17, 2000, the 31-year-old maverick was already a competitive cyclist with little interest in self-imposed limits.

"I had just gotten back from a bunch of races across the country and I was really motivated to pursue it seriously and become an elite cyclist," she said. "I had a new boyfriend. Things were sort of falling into place. I was off on a new part of my life — it had barely started."

It was that very ambition that would reroute Downing's course forever.

"I just remember seeing that car and thinking, 'why is that car not stopping?' I saw my friend get around the car," she recalled. "The next thing I knew, I tried to stop and I couldn't. I hit the car. I flipped up and I landed on the pavement on my back."

The car, heading in the opposite direction at an intersection in Golden, was making a left turn as Downing and her bicycling friend had the right of way. Although the friend managed to narrowly swerve around the car, the driver failed to notice a second bicyclist was following behind.

To paraphrase an adage, Downing — who quickly realized she was in trouble — was stuck precisely in the wrong spot at exactly the wrong split second. With no time for correction, she slammed into the car's windshield before taking a very hard landing onto the road.

"I felt as though my body were disconnected," she writes in "*Cycle of Hope*," noting the severe damage to her spinal cord. "My legs felt like they were floating in midair. It didn't feel right. In fact, it felt horribly wrong. I couldn't feel anything below my waist."

The paralysis would be real and permanent. But so was Downing's determination.

While still in Englewood's Craig Hospital, she began riding her new three-wheeled, arm-intensive bicycle, dodging nurses as she traveled down the hallway. She has been riding and racing ever since and seldom lets anything, physical or mental, get in her way.

So far, Downing has completed more than 100 marathons, duathlons and triathlons. She was the first woman paraplegic to complete an Ironman triathlon and has qualified twice for the Hawaii Ironman World Championships. She has been inducted into the Sportswomen of Colorado Hall of Fame and was named the 2006 Most Inspirational Athlete from the Challenged Athletes Foundation.

“People look at me in a wheelchair and assume that I can’t do anything, but there’s so much more I’ve done your average person wouldn’t even consider,” she said. “I hate to see people putting limits on each other. It’s a big community of people who live very normal lives with disabilities.”

In 2011, Downing put aside her bicycle for a while, but just long enough to participate on the U.S. Rowing team at the World Championships in Slovenia.

When she is tired, she drives her car, adapted with all-hand controls.

The old ‘new’ normal

Life was hard, especially early on, for the new Tricia Downing.

“The first four years — that’s a real rocky time,” she said. “With age comes perspective and a lack of need to compare yourself to other people.”

Downing has thrived for so long that her able-bodied past almost feels like a distant and youthful memory, and it is not something for which she is particularly nostalgic.

“I don’t know if this comes with almost being 50 or just having been in a chair for 18 years, but it’s sort of like a nonissue anymore,” she said. “My life is very normal, as far as I’m concerned.”

A cruel irony: Although Downing has a weakened sense of touch in most of her body, she still suffers chronic pain through the misfiring of nerves.

As she interweaves Pilates and physical therapy with her passion for bicycle riding, Downing has tried her hand at fiction writing with the publication of *“Chance for Rain,”* a semi-autobiographical novel about the life and loves of a paraplegic athlete.

“I’m trying to bring more characters with disabilities to literature,” she said. “I tried to dispel many of the myths that have sort of been placed on me, to be educational as well as entertaining. But it’s a love story.”

Downing, now married herself, is almost Zen-like in her own true-life reflections. She has even contemplated the somewhat awkward hypothetical question of whether her life today might have turned out better than it would have otherwise.

“I think it’s been a much more interesting journey,” she said. “While I’ve had many lows, I think my highs have been higher than they would have been. Would I have been better off if I had had kids? Maybe, but maybe they would have been a pain in the butt.”

An Evening of Hope: Support Wings of Hope for Pancreatic Cancer Research and meet Tricia Downing

Author and Paralympian Tricia Downing will be the keynote speaker at An Evening of Hope for Wings of Hope for Pancreatic Cancer Research, at 6 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 17, at the Education 2 South Building of the Anschutz Medical Campus, 13121 E. 17th Ave. in Aurora. Individual tickets are \$50 and may be purchased at wingsofhopepcr.org. For information on sponsorships, email info@wingsofhopepcr.org or visit wingsofhopepcr.org. Wings of Hope for Pancreatic Cancer Research was founded by Maureen Shul, founding mayor of Castle Pines.

