

WASHINGTONIAN

October 16, 2013

WASHINGTON
VOICES
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Walking With Anthony

On October 21, the author's foundation will host a golf tournament and dinner in Fairfax to raise money for spinal-cord-injury victims' rehabilitation.

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Documenta (2) | Uploaded October 16, 2013

On February 6, 2010 my entire life changed in a second. I was in Miami for the Super Bowl, and at 11:30 AM, I dove into the ocean. It was much shallower than I thought, and when I struck something hard, my entire life flashed before my eyes. The waves came crashing down on me, and I immediately knew I was in trouble. I couldn't move.

My cousin, Bernie McKeever, was with me—he saved my life by pulling me out of the water, and I was transported to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. After surgery, I learned that I had bruised my C5 and C6 vertebrae. I couldn't move anything from my chest down.

After two months in the ICU, I moved into the hospital's rehab center. My injury seemed like a life sentence, and I wasn't willing to accept it. I am a sports fanatic (Go Redskins); I had played sports all my life and always been very active. After my injury, everyday was slated to be a struggle, not just for me but for my entire family.

When I started rehab, our insurance company was covering the expenses. But after 21 days—when I'd made little progress, if any—we learned with no notice that my rehab would no longer be covered.

It turns out that if you break your back, insurance covers rehab, but if you have a spinal-cord injury, it doesn't! The insurance company essentially kicked us to the curb. At the time, I couldn't lift my arms up to feed myself; I couldn't move my body. The actual plan was for me to go home and live in an electric wheelchair for the rest of my life.

In the last three-and-a-half years, I have continuously learned the value of unconditional love, compassion, and, of course, patience from my family. My parents got me to a spinal-cord-injury rehab center in Carlsbad, California, called Project Walk, which costs over \$100,000 a year. I have been attending rehab there for over three years now. I'm lucky.

Today, I am stronger, healthier, and more independent. I'm back at work, I drive a car, I have a beautiful girlfriend. I have my life back. I continue to make tremendous physical progress, which would not have been possible without the financial and loving support of my family. This progress continues to cost money, and my entire family has been there as a support system.

The thing that has been most concerning to me throughout this process is to think: What about everyone else who suffers a spinal-cord injury in an accident? What about the people who don't have the resources to pay for rehabilitation? How are they getting by? I researched and found that insurance companies, like mine, typically only cover 22 days of rehabilitation. Recovery from a spinal-cord injury is costly, and it takes a long time—but it is possible.

Once I learned all of this, I decided I wanted to help other people who have had traumatic injuries like mine. So my mother and I started the Walking With Anthony Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to the rehabilitation of spinal-cord injuries. We raise money to help individuals pay for rehab and to expand rehabilitation centers and support research related to recovery.

This is what brings us to Fairfax this week. For three generations, my family and I, including 22 aunts and uncles and 29 cousins with deep roots in the Washington area, have been die-hard Redskin fans. When we contacted Jerry Olsen, president of the Washington Redskin Alumni, about potentially co-hosting a fundraising event, he and the organization were excited to work with us. And I'm especially excited about the golf tournament and dinner we planned for next week because 100 percent of the proceeds it generates will benefit individuals with spinal-cord injuries.

This is the part where you can get involved: Foursomes, foursomes with Redskins alumni, and tickets to the tournament and/or the dinner and reception that follow it are all still available at walkingwithanthony.org. I hope to see you there!

Anthony Purcell lives on the west coast but will visit Washington this week for his foundation's charity fundraiser Monday, October 21. To see a video about his recovery, click [here](#).