

## Moving on - Paralysis is no match for Bryon Riesch

### special report: executive health

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When Bryon Riesch was 19 years old, he was a freshman at Marquette University, planning to earn a double-major of marketing and international business. However, his life changed forever on April 19, 1998, when he dove onto a slip-and-slide mat and suffered a bruised spinal cord, leaving him paralyzed below the middle of his chest. Undaunted, Riesch refused to allow his misfortune to prevent him from leading a productive life.

He not only works between 25 and 30 hours per week in the information technology department at Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co. in downtown Milwaukee, he also is president of the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation, which has raised more than \$400,000 for spinal cord injury research, scholarships and community projects since its inception in 2001. However, Riesch, 26, is hesitant to take any credit for his achievements. Instead, he credits much of his success to the many people who have helped him get through school, find work and raise money for spinal cord research.

Shortly after his injury, during his three-month stint in the hospital, Riesch was sitting in his hospital room, reflecting on how his life was changing. A talk with his father helped him decide he was going to make the most of his life. "My dad asked me if I could live with this, and I told him yes," Riesch says. "My dad told me that whenever I need something, I should reach out with a handshake and be the best person I can. Ever since that point, I've extended my hand do to the best I can. It's been amazing, even in the hospital, the amount of people I've been able to lean on and get help from."

Because he was using computers so much after his accident, Riesch decided to drop the international business major and add information technology. "After my accident, I was working so much with computers," he says. "It's what I use to get my stuff done. If it wasn't for computers, I wouldn't do much." Midway through his senior year at Marquette, Riesch started looking for a job. Through connections he'd made on campus, he connected with Goodwill's Abil/Ty Connections program, which helps people with disabilities find jobs in the IT field.

Abil/Ty Connection's network of contacts in the business community helped Riesch set up a six-month internship at Northwestern Mutual after his graduation about three years ago, and he was then hired to work there full-time. "The internship was a learning experience, not just in IT, but also, could I handle the workload of the job?" Riesch says. "Northwestern made it easy to say I could do this. The people around me have been good to me. They want to see me succeed."

The company has done things for Riesch that might seem small on the surface, but have enabled him to do the tasks required of him. His computer is fitted with a voice recognition system and headset that allows him to take telephone calls and dictate e-mails and memos onto his computer. He also received a digital voice recorder, which he uses during meetings, because he isn't able to take notes quickly. His desk has been raised a bit higher than most in the office to accommodate his wheelchair.

Riesch was named Goodwill's International Graduate of the Year this summer, because of his success after completing the Abil/Ty Connections program. He was flown to Denver for Goodwill's national awards program. As part of the program, he took part in a television commercial for Goodwill with Donald Driver, wide receiver for the Green Bay Packers. "It was kind of a big shock when they told me about it - I didn't know how big it was," Riesch says. His schedule now prevents him from working more than 25 to 30 hours per week, because of the amount of time he needs to devote to physical therapy.

"I always want to keep my body in shape and healthy enough for in the future, if there is a cure, that I'm ready for it," he says. "I need to keep time set aside for my therapy. I wouldn't mind working more if there was more time in the day." During his few hours away from work and physical therapy, Riesch coaches an eighth-grade boy's basketball team from the Waukesha Catholic School System. The team meets twice a week for practice and generally once a week for games. Riesch says he has been able to temper acceptance of his injury with a sense of optimism for the future, as there are continuing breakthroughs in the field of spinal cord injury research.

"We live in such an exciting and optimistic time," he says. "I have to live day to day. It's so important - I've got to realize what I have right now. And my reality is that I am a C5 quadriplegic, and I have to live life the best I can. "I have a dream that I want to walk again," Riesch says. "I have to hope it will come true. I never want to let that fade, and I want to work toward it. But it's really important for me to keep reality in check and do what I have to do to make my reality today."

The Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation has been part of that approach. Riesch is the president of the foundation, but considers himself a figurehead, saying most of the work is done by volunteers from the Waukesha County business community. The majority of the funds raised by the foundation have been given out for spinal cord injury research, but some has been given to scholarships for students who have spinal cord injuries or their families, and some has been given out in grants.

Riesch says those grants can help people who aren't as fortunate as himself. Riesch's father, Ken Riesch, who is president of Waukesha-based R&R Insurance Services Inc., has helped his son buy a specialized van and has converted a share of the family's home for Bryon to have an apartment there. Grants given to other disabled people have helped install wheelchair ramps, roll-in showers and other features in their homes. "The cost is unreal," Riesch says of making specialized modifications for wheelchairs. "The (foundation) board are all volunteers that really care - that believe in a cause. It's just a fun thing. If you look at our history, I can be proud of what happens when people get together and believe in a cause. "For me getting over an injury like this, I couldn't have done it without my friends, family and neighbors."