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Man's Miracle Recovery: From Paralyzed to Helping Others

By By RICH McHUGH | ABC News Blogs – Thu, Mar 29, 2012 5:28 PM EDT

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Janne Kouri was told he would never walk again. Paralyzed from the neck down after a freak accident in the ocean five years ago, Kouri's entire world was completely turned upside down. But rather than give up, Kourani pushed through with the support of his wife and family, and turned his tragedy into a life's work.

Now, five years after he was told there was no hope for recovery, the 36-year-old can stand up on his own without a walker.

On August 5, 2006, Kouri, of Hermosa Beach, Calif., was playing beach volleyball with some friends when he ran down to the ocean to cool off in between games. He dove into the waves, crashed his head into a hidden sand-bar, and was instantly paralyzed from the neck down.

"I knew something really bad had happened because I couldn't move anything," said Kouri, who was 31 at the time of the accident. "There definitely was -- a moment there where I was thinking that that could be my last breath."

Fortunately an off-duty EMT pulled him ashore and rushed him to the hospital. Kouri was alive, but a doctor delivered devastating news to his then-girlfriend, Susan.

"[The doctor] looked me right in the eye and said, 'You need to be prepared for him never to walk again,'" Susan Kouri, 36, recalled. "I will never forget that."

Before the accident, Kouri had worked as a director of an online social network and was a force of nature. At 6' 4" and 285 pounds, he was the star defensive tackle on the Georgetown University football field with NFL prospects and was called "the general" by his friends because of his take-

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charge attitude.

With his spinal cord fractured in two places, Kouri spent two months in intensive care, developed pneumonia and nearly died twice.

"There were many times he came to me and said, 'You know, you don't need to do this. You don't need to be here,'" Susan said. "I promised him that as long as his heart and his mind stayed the same that I would love him."

That love would change everything, giving Kouri the determination to move forward with his life. As his health returned, the reality of his paralysis was grim and treatment options were bleak.

Cutting-Edge Research Renews Couple's Hope

Finally, the couple found their ray of hope. In their research and after months of Susan traveling around the country visiting rehab centers, they discovered Dr. [Susan Harkema](#) at the Frazier Rehabilitation Institute in Louisville, Ky.

Harkema helped develop a cutting-edge therapy known as "loco-motor training," which teaches the spinal cord how to control motor functions like walking, through repetitive motion. The late actor Christopher Reeve was among her first test subjects to utilize the training; the therapy has now helped hundreds of spinal cord injury victims.

"Dr. Harkema was the one person that told us, 'There is hope for recovery,'" Kouri said.

The couple moved to Louisville to work with Harkema.

"The first day I got there they put me up on the treadmill and I passed out in seven seconds. Shortly after, within days after, I was able to stay up for ten, 15 minutes, and then an hour," Kouri said. "Very quickly I started to get a lot stronger. My circulation improved, blood pressure improved, muscle strength."

After two to three months of training, Kouri had his first milestone -- a little toe wiggle.

"I started wiggling one of my toes, which was an incredible moment," he said. "And I said, 'You know what? I have a chance here.'"

Janne Kouri Stands Up to Help Others

Full of hope, Kouri wanted to return to California and continue loco-motor training near his home, but it wasn't available.

"We brought this to my father and my family and my friends saying 'Hey, we need to do something about the situation. I can't find the type of treatment and rehab that I want in California," he said. "That means that nobody there can."

That sparked a big idea. With the help of family, friends, Harkema and the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, in 2007, they raised the funds to start NextStep Fitness, a non-profit rehab center in Los Angeles where not only Kouri, but anyone in the community could get locomotor training at an affordable cost.

The nonprofit wing of their organization has blossomed as well, launching the [Wheelchair for a Day Challenge](#) in a nationwide effort to raise awareness about the daily challenges associated with paralysis, and to raise funding to help build additional rehab centers across the country.

Many have compared Kouri and Moffat's commitment to helping others to Christopher and Dana Reeve and see their work as a continuation of Reeve's legacy.

"They're an incredible couple, an incredible family, he's obviously an inspiration and somebody I look up to," Kouri said. "He didn't quit till the day he died. And you know, I'm going to take that same mentality into my fight as well. "

Between rounds of rehab, Kouri and Susan turned their tragedy into a future together and got married.

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"She's been amazing," Kouri said. "She's quit her job two times and she sacrificed a lot in her life to stay with me. Most relationships don't make it through this situation, so I'm blessed. She an incredible woman and a wonderful wife and I wouldn't be here without her."

Kouri's Emotional Milestone

In May 2009, Kouri took his first steps in three years with the assistance of a walker. He told "Good Morning America"'s Robin Roberts about reaching the incredible milestone at the time.

"You hear it all the time, but if you put your mind to it, you can make it happen. But you know it's true that if you stay focused and work every single day, you really can do whatever you set your mind to," he said.

Roberts visited Kouri in February for his most recent milestone: standing for the first time, on his own, without his walker.

"I forget how tall I was," he joked with Roberts.

But the best was yet to come, Kouri wanted to stand again and this time, he had a surprise up his sleeve: giving his wife the wedding dance she never had.

"It went from wiggling my toe to gaining more function in my legs and [being] able to then walk on a walker, and to now being able to stand independently for a short period of time," Kouri said. "From there, the sky's the limit, so we'll be walkin' one day soon."

[Click here for more information on Next Step Fitness](#) and their first-ever [Wheelchair for a Day challenge](#).

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G Pa • 9 hours ago

16 0

Great story. I look forward to seeing how much more he will improve and wish him speed in his recovery.

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Celia • Washington, District of Columbia • 8 hours ago

13 0

Best article on yahoo I've read all day

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Hollander • 9 hours ago

26 1

Negative comments on a story like this one? Wow, some of you really are bitter, nasty, small minded folk!

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Eve • Hayward, California • 7 hours ago

8   0

That is a Blessing to be Greatful for! :) God Bless You Both! I also remember when Christopher Reeve's became paralyzed...and my heart was broken for him. I always prayed he'd be able to walk again someday. unfortunately that never happened for him. :(I pray that Someday, that You will be able to... [More](#)

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Gee • 7 hours ago

5   0

'Who has found a capable wife, she proves to be more valuable than riches'.

[▶ Reply](#)

Stuff • 8 hours ago

14   1

Guess I'm jaded and cynical at this point. Some often we associate those who are outwardly beautiful to be ugly on the inside. But this lady is even more beautiful on the inside than on the outside.

And Janne, keep going brother, you're an inspiration!

[▶ 2 Replies](#)

Realist • 26 minutes ago

0   0

Not an act of God. Just a bruise to the central nervous system. The Medula was probably compressed by a severe tilt of the head. You're not Gumby dammit!!!

[▶ Reply](#)

** • 12 hours ago

46   4

This is why enterprising doctors deserve the funding to develop programs like this. Stem cell research and other "political/religious fringe" topics need to stop being debated. Let medicine do its job!

[▶ 4 Replies](#)

A Yahoo! User • Miami, Florida • 10 hours ago

22   1

Good for him and luckily he found a keeper in his wife.

[▶ 1 Reply](#)

Terry • Memphis, Tennessee • 9 hours ago

27   3

A great story on this day before the day of the greatest miracle.

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Steve • 11 hours ago

18   5

Sounds expensive, I wonder if the new Universal Healthcare bill would cover this treatment for everyone who needs it.

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A Yahoo! User • 10 hours ago

23   2

this story proves that miracles are real

[▶ 1 Reply](#)

Daniel • Huntsville, Alabama • 9 hours ago

16   3

God bless him and his family.

[▶ Reply](#)

Jezebel • 12 hours ago

41   10

God is Awesome the way he made our body, mind and heart.

[▶ 6 Replies](#)

Tim • Toledo, Ohio • 10 hours ago

15   1

Just an amazing story. I wish they had video. You're an inspiration, Kouri.

[▶ Reply](#)

Moedaman • 12 hours ago

19   2

God Bless. Wishing you all the best sir and hoping your family stands by your side no matter what the outcome. I have MS and now know it is very possible to regain walking and such when dealing with trauma and not a disease. You can and will succeed !!!!!!! Promise me when you do to help others... [More](#)

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Michael Withstand • 9 hours ago

10   1

Okay guys admit it you CLICKED on the news to see the picture of that beautiful lady besides the man. Happy for this guy.

[▶ 3 Replies](#)

ToddG • Aurora, Minnesota • 2 hours 47 minutes ago

3   0

Outstanding!! Inspired!! God Bless You Both!!

Just goes to show, there really are a few top shelf ladies out there that are keepers.. I am very Glad you found one too because a Great Lady makes all the difference in a mans life!!

[▶ Reply](#)

Sean X • 8 hours ago

6   0

Awesome story, awesome couple.

[▶ Reply](#)

Oppressed • 2 hours 0 minutes ago

0   3

Jump around jump around jump up and get down!!

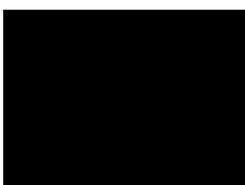
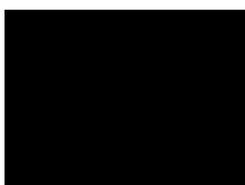
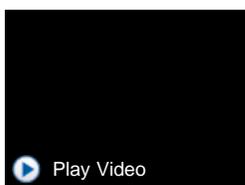
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