

Two Good Legs to Stand On

by Rick Bowers

If anybody tries to tell you that amputees can't do a certain kind of work, you might want to kindly refer him or her to Jim "Rambo" Ramage. A bilateral lower-extremity amputee, Jim does the type of difficult manual labor that most able-bodied men couldn't succeed at – heavy equipment repair and welding. To do this job as an amputee, Jim simply requires two things – the right attitude and the right prostheses.

Fortunately, he has both.

Becoming an Amputee

Jim became an amputee almost seven years ago in 1999 when he was 51. He was outside his shop – Rambo Welding in Harmony, Pennsylvania – moving a bulldozer part that weighed more than 1,500 pounds when the accident occurred. While he was trying to make sure the part was properly hooked onto the truck crane it was attached to, the part came loose and hit Jim with such an impact that it knocked him several feet through the air.

"I remember lying there in the gravel alone, busted up with a broken collar bone, a ruptured spleen, and two mangled legs," Jim recalls. "I was in a lot of pain and trying to 'holler' but not much was coming out."

One of his employees, Jeff Prady, heard the thud and came out to see what was happening. After Jeff called 911, an ambulance arrived quickly, and within 30 minutes, Jim was on his way by helicopter to Presbyterian Hospital in Pittsburgh where he received 10 pints of blood.

Jim's legs could not be saved, however. That night, his left leg was amputated above the knee, and his right leg was amputated below the knee. In addition, his ruptured spleen was removed.

The Love of a Good Woman

When Jim regained consciousness and realized that he had lost both legs, the first thing he asked his wife, Deb, was, "Do you still love me?"

"I was just so happy that he was alive," Deb says. "I told him that he was about to learn what love really is. I took my marriage vows seriously,

for better or worse. My children were 4, 6 and 8 years old when I married Jim. He stuck by me and helped me raise and provide for them. So how could I run out on him when he needed me? I like to think we're like swans. They mate for life and stick by each other's side."

Jim still jokes that the first thing Deb actually did



was check out his life insurance policy.

"I did not," Deb says, laughing.

In reality, the incident has actually strengthened their 22-year marriage, they say. Like many couples who have been together a long time, they talk at the same time, seeming to know what the other is thinking and even finishing each other's sentences now and then. The banter between them is loving and gentle, and humor plays an important part in their relationship. It's clear that this union, the second marriage for both, is alive and well.

"I wouldn't have made it without her," Jim says. "When I got down, she boosted me up."

Recovery

Five days after his amputations, Jim was transferred to Harnmarville Rehabilitation Hospital to begin his recovery process. "I walked out of the rehab hospital 35 days later on new legs," Jim says.

For a while, Jim used two special canes when he walked. Then, one day, his surgeon – knowing that challenge motivated Jim – challenged him to give up one of them.

"So, I did," Jim says. "In June, I walked into his office with just one regular cane. You don't tell me I can't do something." After eight months of physical therapy, he partly gave up the other cane as well. He still uses one at times but not in "familiar territory" like his shop.

Still a Struggle

Though Jim has dealt well with his limb loss, it hasn't been easy.

Fortunately, about six weeks before Jim's accident, he had incorporated his business; otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to apply for worker's compensation, and things would have been a lot worse for him. Perhaps the business would have been ruined.

"I was depressed and confused and scared at times," he admits. "My biggest concern was that I wouldn't be able to stand for an hour at a time. How could I work if I couldn't stand? How could

I support my family? What kind of life would I have?"

The mild depression finally lifted when he went back to running his business eight months after the accident, but it was at least a year before Jim was steady on his feet again. "I couldn't have made it without Deb," he repeats.

A Man With a Work Ethic

Deb helped with the business while Jim was recovering, and she even donned a hard hat at times and helped out around the shop.

"It wasn't easy," Deb says, "but I knew that with Jim's strong work ethic (his father gave him that) and his strong mind, he'd be back at work soon." In fact, when Jim's customers worried that he would have to go out of business, Jim went to an Open House for his best customer just three and a half weeks after his accident to ensure them that he'd be back. He was in a wheelchair and wearing shorts.

Even though it was difficult, he wanted to stick with the career he had always known and to continue his business. He wasn't interested in re-training for a desk job. It just wasn't him.

Using Technology

Jim received a \$50,000 grant from Vocational Rehabilitation in June 2000 that helped him get both a computerized burning table that cuts shapes in steel and a forklift with hand controls. He also used the money to learn AutoCAD, a computer program that enables him to draw shapes on a computer and then send them to the burning table. This technology has helped him greatly.

Since returning to work, Jim has become a legend. "I'm gonna have Rambo do it," customers and prospective customers say. "Look at him go!"

"I'm still stubborn," Jim says. "I still try to do things myself. Whether it's changing an engine in a truck or fixing a bulldozer, I still find a way to get it done myself."

Getting Help, Helping Others

Looking back, Jim and Deb say that the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) is the thing that helped them most after Jim lost his legs. Since learning about the ACA, they've attended every ACA conference since 1999, except one when Jim was ill, and have taken advantage of ACA literature.

Jim is now a member of the Western Pennsylvania Amputees Unlimbited support group, and the couple take great pleasure in helping new amputees.

Going through amputation and recovery has made Jim a better person, Deb says. "He's not afraid to cry now."

"Yes," Jim says. "I'm softer, more caring, and enjoy things more."

What If?

It's easy to wonder, though, what might have become of Jim's business and his life if he had not been able to get the prostheses he needed to be able to walk and work again. Would he have been able to return to his business or would he have lost everything – his work, his dreams, and his pride?

Fortunately, Jim and Deb never had to find out. Thanks to excellent insurance (worker's compensation), Jim was able to get back what he needed – two good legs to stand on.



Opening Doors to the Workplace for People With Disabilities

by Rick Bowers

When Frank (not his real name) was hired to work for a national nonprofit organization, he quickly realized that he would need special equipment to do his daily work.



A bilateral upper-limb amputee who wears artificial limbs with split hooks, Frank was unable to use a regular computer keyboard and mouse efficiently – and a large part of his job required him to do so. Fortunately, although neither he nor his new supervisor knew exactly how to solve the problem, they were both willing to find out what it would take to help him succeed in his job.

A consultant at the Alliance for Technology Access (ATA), a nonprofit organization that helps people with disabilities reach their potential through assistive technology, told Frank and his supervisor about a special keyboard that he thought would work for Frank. Frank's company purchased one of the devices, and Frank is still using it today. It cost approximately \$300 and was the only special accommodation Frank needed to do his job.

The ADA

Fortunately for Frank and other amputees, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was passed in 1990 and prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities, requires employers with 15 or more employees to provide "reasonable accommodation" to employees with disabilities to help them perform their jobs unless it would cause the employer "undue hardship" (*Job-Hunting for the So-Called Handicapped or*

People Who Have Disabilities).

Reasonable accommodation, according to ADA guidelines, generally means any modification or adjustment that will enable a qualified person with a disability to apply for a job, to perform its essential functions, or to enjoy the rights and privileges of the job at the same level as those employees without a disability.

Obstacles that may need to be overcome through special accommodations may include procedural barriers such as work and break times and physical barriers such as inaccessible equipment or workplace facilities. Reasonable accommodations might include providing such devices as speech-recognition software or special keyboards for people who only have one arm, providing access to workplace lunchrooms and restrooms for people in wheelchairs, or modifying a person's work schedule to allow him or her to take more breaks or attend physical therapy.

The Job Interview

If you are an amputee seeking employment, there will inevitably come a time when you will have to go to a company for a personal interview. Though interviews are stressful for everyone, if you have a disability, especially a visible one, it can be even more difficult. As the employer speaks to you, perhaps you will feel that he or she is trying to



determine how your disability will affect your ability to handle the job. He or she may also be trying to figure out how much money your disability will cost the company – how much the company will have to spend to provide “reasonable accommodations” to help you do your job. In fact, employers might not be willing to hire a person with a disability for fear that such accommodations are going to be extremely expensive.

Of course, this is not the reason they will give for not hiring you; they’ll just make sure to find someone more qualified.

The Statistical Reality

Fortunately, providing “reasonable accommodations” is rarely a hardship for a company. The keyboard Frank needed cost only \$300. And that’s not unusual.

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN), for example, has shown that 15 percent of accommodations required for people with disabilities cost nothing, 51 percent cost between \$1 and \$500, 12 percent cost between \$501 and \$1000, and only 22 percent cost more than \$1000. Moreover, Francine Tishman, former executive director of the National Business and Disability Council, says that more than half cost less than \$100 (*Americans with Disabilities at Work*).

In addition, although an employer might expect to have to provide an expensive accommodation, such as installing a lower water fountain for an employee in a wheelchair, the accommodation might be provided less expensively by installing a paper cup dispenser next to the higher water fountain used by other employees. By using creative thinking, it is often possible to find a more economical way to satisfy the reasonable accommodation requirement.

Making It Easier

JAN, a free consulting service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the U.S. Department of Labor,



Jeff A. Zeller became an ABC-certified prosthetist after losing his leg below the knee to a drug- and alcohol-impaired driver.

provides people with disabilities, employers, and other interested parties information about accommodations to help people with disabilities acquire and keep jobs.

When an employer or employee doesn’t know how to solve a problem that is impeding the work of someone with a disability, JAN consultants – like the ATA did for Frank – can help him or her come up with solutions for specific situations.

In addition to providing solution ideas, numerous organizations even provide funding for accommodations (see www.jan.wvu.edu/links/funding.htm), and the government offers tax incentives to employers to encourage them to be willing to make accommodations (see www.jan.wvu.edu/links/ADAtam1.html#III).

“Every state has vocational rehabilitation agencies whose sole purpose is to assist people with disabilities to obtain the skills, training and confidence necessary to enable them to take their rightful place in the economy,” says the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR). These agencies might also provide assistive technology, personal care attendants, a prosthesis, a wheelchair, a lift, adaptive driving

equipment or transportation to help consumers perform their work duties. (*For more information about vocational rehabilitation, see pages 78-82.*)

With the ADA on our side, the low cost of most accommodations, and help from organizations and the government in finding and paying for accommodations, employers really have little to fear. It’s only a matter of letting them know.

For more information on accommodations and adaptive technology that might help you, please contact the following:

Alliance for Technology Access

Phone: 707/778-3011
www.ATAccess.org

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

Phone: 800/526-7234
www.jan.wvu.edu

RESNA Technical Assistance Project

Phone: 703/524-6686
www.resna.org/taproject/index.html

Vocational Rehabilitation State Offices

<http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/SBSES/VOCREHAB.HTM>