

the **STRENGTH** to **CARRY ON**

Amputees share their secrets of success

by Rick Bowers



Erica Capron

About 4 years ago, Erica Capron was sitting in her wrecked car, looking down at her two completely severed legs. Just 9 months later, she was at the Amputee Coalition of America's National Conference, walking around on prosthetic legs. She was going forward with life, and she was positively glowing.

Only 4 months after her accident, she returned to the University of North Carolina on computerized prosthetic legs for her junior year and was able to graduate almost on time in the summer of 2007. Today, she can do pretty much everything she did before her accident, such as walking her dog, driving her car, and going to concerts and festivals.

Why? What helped this young woman adjust so quickly to the loss of her legs and the problems that accompany such a loss?

Get an Attitude – A Positive One

A positive attitude can certainly help.

Looking back to the accident, Erica, who's now in her mid-20s, remembers that she was really more worried about her boyfriend who was in the car with her than about herself. She was just happy that he wasn't dead – and, of course, happy to be alive herself.

Although she spent about 3 weeks in the hospital, she remained positive, believing that she would ultimately recover.

"I never gave up because I never heard people say that I would never walk again," Erica says. "If you tell yourself that you're not going to be able to do something, then chances are that you won't be able to. It's crucial to keep yourself motivated."

Get Support

One way to stay motivated, she says, is to get involved in a support group, which is what she did early on.

"I learned a lot about taking care of myself, and these people told me that I could call them anytime," Erica says. "They would visit me, and we would go out to lunches. It was great moral support – something that you can't find from your other friends."

Get in Shape

In addition to making sure that she was OK emotionally, Erica realized that she needed to take care of herself physically. She did this mainly through physical therapy to strengthen her core and back and through swimming, which she believes is the best way to exercise the entire body. Although her insurance stopped paying for her physical therapy after a couple of months, she believed that it was so important that she was willing to pay for more of it out-of-pocket.

Get a Great Prosthetist

Erica's prosthetists' previous experience with Stella Sieber, another bilateral above-knee amputee, was also important.

After fitting Stella with two computerized legs and finding that they were difficult for her to use, her prosthetists fitted her with foreshortened prostheses. Sometimes called "stubbies," these prostheses are like short stilts without knees. As Stella's balance, strength and confidence improved, the prosthetists gradually increased her height until she was better able to use the computerized legs. They decided to follow the same proven method with Erica.

"It was an excellent strategy," Erica says. "My recovery was exceptionally quick. I was walking

on computerized legs comfortably within a few months after the accident, which is pretty awesome.”

Get Back to Living

Today, thanks to her excellent recovery, Erica works full time in the judicial system for the State of North Carolina and part time in her mother’s law office. When she attended the ACA conference, she became especially interested in legal advocacy for people with disabilities and is now preparing to apply for law school.

“I was very lucky to have excellent insurance and everything that I needed after my accident, but until I went to the ACA conference, I didn’t realize that not too many people are that fortunate.”

Don’t Listen to the Naysayers

Unfortunately, everyone isn’t surrounded by the same positive environment that Erica had either.

When Kevin Trees had a right above-knee amputation in October 2005 as the result of a motorcycle accident, he experienced some negativity.

“If I had listened to all the medical professionals say I would never walk again and that I should give up on being a cop, you would be footing my Social Security bill right now!” Kevin says.

Fortunately, Kevin didn’t listen. “Doctors make statements based on past observations of the majority of patients,” he explains. “The beauty of it is that we are not machines, and, therefore, we can ‘beat the odds.’”

Decide What You Want

Kevin believes that the ability to move forward has a lot to do with what amputees want for their life. And that, he says, is the first thing they need to figure out “right there in the hospital bed.”

“I can be a burden on everyone around me, let other illnesses increase through my immobility, be depressed and feel sorry for myself, or I can decide to be an example for others,” he says.

Kevin decided that he wanted to return to his career, and he did. And that was no little feat when you realize what he does. He’s an 11-year veteran police officer and is currently a homicide detective. Before that, and after his amputation, he copiled his department’s patrol helicopter. In his spare time, Kevin is also the head coach of his son’s football team.

Consider Others

Kevin, who is now 40 and is

married and has two children, says that new amputees need to evaluate their relationships and put a value on them.

“Your amputation will affect everyone close to you, so continue being responsible,” he says. “My children want a father to swim in the pool, go out to eat, help with homework, etc. My life is not just about me.”

Find Ways to Overcome Physical Problems

As far as the physical aspects of amputation are concerned, Kevin says that balance and fear of falling are two of the biggest problems for leg amputees. He actually practiced falling and getting back up quickly so that he would be prepared when it really happened.

“No,” he says. “It’s not fair that amputees must relearn how to do such basic activities; however, it is imperative that they do so.”

Knowing that amputees use much more energy than others on a daily basis, Kevin realized that getting back in shape was essential. After his amputation, he used a treadmill and also took up full-contact karate, which he says helped with his balance and was the best thing to help him get back in shape. Kevin still works out with weights two to three times a week.

Don’t Consider Yourself “Disabled”

Even when it comes to the physical aspects of his life, however, Kevin realizes the importance of the mind.

“I will never consider myself handicapped or disabled,” Kevin says. “Unless you are old and naturally out of shape due to age, toss the handicap placard and force yourself to walk farther.”

Realize That Everyone Is Different

Though some amputees begin to thrive very quickly, others, for a variety of reasons, go through the recovery process more slowly.

Manuel Salazar had very extensive injuries and, therefore, faced more difficulties than most other amputees.

About 6 years ago, Manuel was electrocuted by 115,000 volts – twice – when a crane he was on touched a power line. He was burned over 50 percent of his body and had to have all four of his limbs amputated – his arms up to the shoulder and his legs above the knees.

It was a devastating blow to the young man. He was depressed and angry, and medical professionals told him that he’d never walk again.

“I was angry at first,” he says. “I didn’t see why they saved my life. I think the hardest part was dealing with the loss of all four limbs because it’s difficult to do anything like that. It’s hard going from being independent to being totally dependent on somebody else.”

Manuel, 28, says it took him close to 2 years to get over the anger.

“The hard part,” he says, “was being self-conscious and worrying about how I looked. I just wanted to hide away.”

About all he did in the beginning was go to therapy and return home. It wasn’t until after he and his wife divorced that he started getting out more and not caring what other people think.

Go Public When the Time Is Right

When someone first suggested that Manuel participate in a support group, he rejected the idea. After a while, however, he decided to try it and found it very beneficial.



Kevin Trees and his son, Cameron

"I've never met anybody in the same shoes as me," he says, "but I've met other amputees, and it does help knowing that I'm not the only one."

In addition to the informal help of other amputees, Manuel also had numerous sessions with a psychologist. In fact, he feels that he needed emotional help more than he did physical help.

Set Goals

The turning point for him, he says, was the realization that there are still a lot of goals he wants to accomplish.

Wanting to be independent is one of the most important things, he says, and it helps to have a large group of people pushing and inspiring you and telling you that you can still do anything you want to, although you might have to do it differently.

Manuel has lived alone since his divorce, although he has 24-hour care available through a nursing service. He has learned to do many things through trial and error, and he can now do things he didn't think he would ever be able to, such as pull himself up in bed, roll over, feed himself, brush his teeth, and sit in his chair with his prosthesis.

Find Inspiration

Before he went to the ACA conference in June 2005, Manuel had just begun walking on stubbies a little every day.

"I had a lot of inspiration and got a lot of helpful information at the conference," he says. "Ever since then, I've been walking on the stubbies all day, and I've hardly been in the wheelchair at all, except when I get tired."

Like Erica, he hopes to go from stubbies to full computerized legs in the future. Because of his excellent insurance and worker's compensation, Manuel was also able to get a permanent adaptive van that he can drive independently. Today, he is the owner of an auto body shop in Colorado called Progressive Auto Works, which employs several people.

Like Erica and Kevin, Manuel is experiencing all that life has to offer and is willing to work hard for it. Interestingly, the experience of these three amputees shows that the things people need to succeed as amputees are pretty much the same things that people need to succeed in life in general. It's more a matter of degree than anything. ■



Stella Sieber and Manuel Salazar at the Achilles Track Club's Hope & Possibility 5K/1 Mile Run/Walk.



Learning Lessons Late in Life

by Rick Bowers

Tom Roberts was 63 in December 1999, when he had to have both of his legs amputated above the knee due to diabetic neuropathy and circulation problems. The following years as a bilateral amputee have taught him several things about living with limb loss that he would like to share with new amputees.

First, he says, it is important to find out what you need medically and to learn how to insist that it gets done.

Unfortunately, Tom didn't get the physical therapy that he needed right after his amputations, and, as a result, he had balance problems and developed contractures (shortened muscles or tendons). (See pages 53-59 for more information about appropriate physical therapy.)

"It took a long time to learn to be assertive," Tom says.

By the time he did get the physical therapy that he needed – after about 4 months – it was late and much damage had already been done.

Second, it is important for people with disabilities to plan ahead, Tom says. Now that he's driving again, he must be even more careful.

"Forays into unfamiliar territory call for research and planning to ensure such things as accessibility, the availability of parking, and accessible toilets. I now have to plan for things that I simply 'did' in the past," Tom says.

Third, he says, it is important to be able to ask for help since you really need it. In fact, Tom has even developed his own "line" for such situations.

"Numerous lovely people have pumped gas for me," he says, "after being somewhat startled by my opener: 'Have you done your good deed today?'" ■