

Meeting Adversity Head On

*The journey to recovery can be slow . . .
or it can open up doors of opportunity.
Matt Berwick chose the latter.*

February 2003

"Come on, Matt, get up; quit fooling around" were the words that resounded that fateful day of February 1, 2003. That was the day that Imperial resident Matt Berwick's life changed in an instant.

Matt, always full of life and a prankster, slipped from a railing at Valley Church while waiting to go with a group of youths for what was to be a fun skiing trip to Hidden Valley. Everyone around him at that moment thought he was laying on the ground making "snow angels." Even his parents insisted, "Come on Matt, get up off the ground," until Matt said, "I CAN'T MOVE..I'M SERIOUS; I CAN'T MOVE."

Then 15 years old, the life that Matt envisioned for his future changed drastically. Now being rushed to a hospital to have emergency intervention on his vertebrae, it seemed all too unreal.

He spent the next three months in intensive rehab at Harmarville Rehabilitation Center. His life had changed forever.

Life sometimes doesn't go the way we plan it. This talented teenager played soccer and loved performing in school musicals. He even attended Parkway West Career and Technology Center in his sophomore year to take its Travel and Hospitality Program, thinking he could parlay his acting talents into a career as the entertain-

ment director on a cruise ship.

His hopes and dreams began to melt away on that fateful winter day.

Suddenly, Matt had to focus on the task at hand. He spent the rest of his sophomore year trying to regain his strength, getting used to being wheelchair-bound. He was now paralyzed in both legs and had lost some motor movement of his arms and hands.

Fortunately, Matt confronted his disability and chose to forge on.

There are desperate times in one's life where there are angels along the way to help. Matt found some of his angels in the people he met who had similar physical problems, but they refused to let those problems keep them down.

Coupled with the need to keep physically fit and have some camaraderie with people facing similar challenges, Matt joined the wheelchair rugby team. There, he drew off the strength of those who chose to fight. He also joined the Pittsburgh Curling Club. While not nearly as intense as rugby, Matt got to interact with individuals with and without disabilities.

June 2005

It's a standing ovation when Matt is helped across the stage to receive his high school diploma. It had been two long years to reach that point. There wasn't a dry eye in the packed gymnasium as he held up his diploma.

Fall 2005 to present

Matt decided to attend Point Park University in downtown Pittsburgh and pursue a major in Elementary Education.

His parents, Kevin and Joanne Berwick, who both work downtown, have been a constant force in his educational career. At first, they drove him into school every day until he was able to obtain his license.

"They have been wonderful and





ABOVE: West Allegheny alumnus Matt Berwick, Class of '05, seated in the back, center, with the students in Diane Wiechelt's second grade class at McKee Elementary where he is undertaking his student teaching this semester.

so supportive of everything," he says.

For the past four years, he has achieved so much already. Matt is getting some strength back in his legs, he has gotten his driver's license, and he is on his third modified van that he drives himself. It's not a typical drive; Matt must get out of his wheelchair, manipulate it into the van, drive to his destination, then retrieve the wheelchair, get in it and get to where he needs to go. But he is a determined young man.

And he does get around. His sports schedule is an endurance test even for one without a disability.

"Sports keep me going, they help with my upper body strength," Matt explains. He practices rugby every Sunday from mid-September through mid-March, making the drive to Harmarville where the team practices. He's now a veteran player on the team. He also travels to Slippery Rock, and even out of state, to play in the tournaments.

Starting next month, he will start playing with the Pittsburgh Curling Club on a regular basis at the RMU Island Sports Center.

It will be challenging because, he explains, "There are players with and without disabilities and in ages ranging from 20 to 60 years old."

August 2010

It's a typical fall day in the classroom at McKee Elementary School. Matt is in his final year at Point Park and doing his student teaching right in his own back yard, at his alma mater -- West Allegheny School District.

He is excited to have the opportunity to student teach in the

second grade at McKee Elementary under the tutelage of Diane Wiechelt.

"I'm currently teaching math, spelling, and science (the students were learning about frogs on this particular day).

Because of today's technology in the classroom, teaching for someone like Matt is a bit easier. No longer using the traditional chalkboards that required standing in front of the class and reaching up to write on the board with chalk, Matt can comfortably instruct the students from his seat, using a Smart Board. The board also allows the children to interact with the material being presented.

"The kids have been good," he says. "It feels good to be back in the district."

Matt will move to Tom Hamm's fifth grade class soon, and help teach his students, until graduation from Point Park University in December.

When asked what his long-range goals are, besides landing a full-time teaching job, he says, "I think I'd like to pursue maybe further education to get a certificate in technology, or a degree in adaptive physical activity, so I can not only be a teacher, but a mentor to others with disabilities."

So, when on that cold February day seven years ago when Matt was told to get up, quit fooling around, and get going, he obviously was listening. But this 23-year-old young man has done it in a much different way.