

BY DAVID RUTTER

A New Life, A New Community

The story of a man who fell, then built a safety net for colleagues and their families in the HVAC industry. Enter the fledgling Joe Groh Foundation, a noble cause with a case to go nationwide.



The Joseph Groh Foundation raises funds to help others with spinal cord injuries through efforts including an annual charity golf outing held in the Dallas-Ft.Worth Metroplex.

JOE GROH TURNED HIS SLEEK MOUNTAIN bike down the path that ringed Gravevine Lake near Dallas.

It was Father's Day 2008, and the day of exercise would work up a solid sweat and further sooth him. The day already had been rich in family moments with his wife and three grown children.

He looked east over the broad blue lake and when he returned his gaze to the path, he realized something was wrong. The gravel and dirt had started to unravel. The bike swerved sharply, and he lurched head-first over the handle bars and down the hill.

He landed hard and does not remember much else of that day.

He did not die that day. He could have died very easily. In fact, his continued survival may have been a stroke of random luck. But his luck was not without limits.

He was paralyzed, his neck was fractured and

the cracked C-4 vertebra meant he would never walk again. The fit, active construction executive who had spent his life in worksite hardhats would find this new life from the seat of a motorized, quadriplegic wheelchair, not a mountain bike's saddle.

What sort of life would that be for a now 56-year-old man? He worked for six months just to be medically stabilized enough to face the world, and all the while he was thinking about the life he might construct for himself.

Groh was man whose life was building things, starting from his days with a family of construction professionals in Sterling, Ill. Everybody in his family had been reared with a hammer in hand and tool belt around their waists. He'd eventually become a national executive with Lennox, but his business life always had been about building something out of nothing.

He now decided he could not surrender that

urge to construct reality of out chaos.

So he decided to build a community.

The world of cyber friendship and experiences managed through the electronic web has broadened what being community can mean. More than the bricks, glass and steel of Joe Groh's life, he now found a way to build a community of ideas and values.

The mechanism was the Al Groh Foundation, which is headquartered in Texas but has ambitions to stretch to the country's boundaries.

"I think I'm like a lot of men who are consumed with their jobs, families and career and think that eventually in their lives they'll be able to do something like this," he says. "So I began to explore the idea with friends and colleagues. I was in the HVAC (heating, ventilating, air-conditioning) industry for 35 years, and you develop a lot of friends and colleagues all across the country."

The fledgling Joe Groh Foundation has a tight-

ly focused beam of light on its generosity. It's a low-drag, no overhead operation. The foundation always is on the lookout for family members of those who had worked in the HVAC industry but had suffered serious injury or illness. The beneficiaries would be people who had suffered a full misdirection in their lives and needed friends at their back. People with hammers.

Groh found the industry was packed with willing hands. By definition they know how to build homes, repair homes, raise homes from ashes. Now they were working for the extended family of their trades.

"Based on what I knew of the people in this industry, we knew they would be receptive," he says. "Knowledge is growing. We have found contractors very interested in participating. It's not uncommon for them already to be involved in Habitat for Humanity."

Trade groups and charities all over the country nominate candidates for the Groh Foundation which raises money, primarily with regular golf and sports events. The foundation rounds up a team of local contractors and tradesmen who descend on the target in a metallic whirlwind of hammers, saws, and nail guns.

The foundation pays as much as it can raise and the tradesmen kick in the rest, often through the Service Roundtable, an industry alliance.

That whirlwind is what happened to Debbie Clapperton of Matteson, Ill., whose late husband had been an HVAC tradesmen. Clapperton suffered the death of her husband, a former HVAC technician, and then came her own brain aneurysm that stole her ability to live on her own or care for her children. She was nearly left homeless before the Groh Whirlwind came to save her home with a \$50,000 rebirth.

It's the HVAC version of an Amish barn-raising.


Ultimately, he wants satellite operations with fundraisers and volunteers everywhere, supported by a board that reflects the entire nation. He's working on that every day with Susan, his wife of 30 years, sons Stephen, 26, Eric, 23 and daughter Christine, 19.

"It's just one example of what people in this industry can do," Groh adds.

To this point, the foundation targeted two major projects its first year, four more in 2011, but the goal is unbounded. "One thing I found out with my spinal injury is that people who suffer this injury almost always are thrown into very bad economic situations. They lose their jobs; lose insurance. The people in our business have always been there to help and now there's a way."

And when the trades folk gather their tools and supplies after the whirlwind subsides, they leave behind lives restored.

It leaves people able to stand on their own. That's just what Joe Groh wanted to build.

For more information on the Joseph Groh Foundation, a Texas Non-Profit Public Corp., visit www.josephgrohfoundation.org. 

David Rutter is the editorial director of Quintessential Media.

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