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## Local man uses tragedy to help others

by Bianca Kaplanek

DEL MAR — After a January 2006 motorcycle accident left Eric Northbrook paralyzed from the waist down, he wasted little time turning his personal tragedy into an opportunity to help others. One month later, while still undergoing his own recovery and rehabilitation, the Olivenhain resident established the **HeadNorth Foundation** to provide support for people affected by spinal cord injuries.

Since then the Del Mar-based nonprofit organization has granted more than to \$250,000 to 70 recipients. Randal Schober, the group's executive director, estimates there are about 3,000 spinal cord injury survivors in San Diego County, and that number grows at a rate of about 100 per year.

“San Diego is an active, outdoor community so we probably have a higher percentage of injuries just due to the nature of the area,” Schober said.



Car accidents, a category that includes motorcycles and dune buggies, are the No. 1 cause of injuries, followed by sporting accidents, according to Schober.

“But it really does vary,” he said. Recipients have included a woman who fell off a cliff, a 14-year-old who had a tractor roll over on him and a 77-year-old man who was paralyzed when he fell down the stairs after suffering a heart attack.

HeadNorth provides assistance through two grant programs. Spinal cord injuries occur suddenly, forcing patients to deal with the life-changing event with limited knowledge and resources. The Response One Program assists victims and their families following the injury by providing funds for immediate transportation and lodging needs, as well as

resources and information about future challenges. It also provides in-hospital counseling by other spinal cord injury survivors.

Once the critical needs related to spinal cord injury have been met, the rehabilitation process begins. The Response Two Program provides the necessary equipment and services needed to gain greater mobility and return to an active and productive lifestyle. Many survivors want to return to work and participate in the same activities they once enjoyed.

The Response Two Program supports these goals by providing financial assistance to purchase assistive devices and equipment designed to increase mobility and enhance quality of life. HeadNorth also has created a registry of resources, from athletic trainers to manage-care specialists, to make it easy for individuals to find the help they need.

Recipients must be legal residents of San Diego County. Response Two recipients can reapply after one full year has passed from the original application date.

Funding comes primarily from private donations and two major fundraising events. Last month the organization raised about \$170,000 at its fourth annual golf tournament. Registration is currently under way for the second annual Silver Strand Half Marathon and 5K set for Nov. 15.

“In these economic times, we’re looking for grant opportunities,” Schober said. “We’re trying to expand our funding opportunities by diversity.” To that end, Schober said HeadNorth recently launched Casual for a Cause, a new program in which employees at a participating company pay to wear casual clothes on selected days. Money raised is donated to HeadNorth.

In addition to helping local spinal cord injury patients, HeadNorth supports ongoing research for a cure for paralysis. The organization also seeks to increase awareness with Day in a Chair, a program available to businesses and schools that allows able-bodied people to experience life in a wheelchair.

It was a day Schober describes as “a great eye opener.”

“I really learned to appreciate what you have to do, the reaction you get from other people and the things we take for granted,” he said. “Everything you do, you have to plan ahead because it takes twice or three times longer to do things. You have to be flexible.”

Schober said he is inspired by each story, but a few stand out, such as Manny Fernandez, who was paralyzed when he was shot in the spine at 13 months old. HeadNorth helped provide funding to replace the family’s converted van that was stolen at a July Fourth barbecue and later found stripped and burned.

After 38 years of sponge baths, Wayne Hosaka recently received funding to install a shower. “For the first time in years he can now shower with water running over his

body,” Schober said. “Every day I get a reality check when I think I’m having a bad day.”

Visit <http://www.headnorth.org> for other stories, more information or to donate.