

# Foundation brings normalcy to lives of paraplegics

By Karen Billing

One local non-profit is carrying out their goals to redefine what is possible for people whose lives have been altered by sudden spinal cord injuries. The HeadNorth Foundation recently celebrated their third year of existence in San Diego, while maintaining an ultimate goal to become a nationally recognized resource and ultimately help find a cure for paralysis.

The foundation is committed to providing assistance to spinal cord injury (SCI) survivors and their families. They focus on making smooth transitions in tough times through recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration into an active lifestyle.

Olivenhain resident Eric Northbrook founded HeadNorth after his life was forever changed by a motorcycle accident.

"The foundation is not about me at all," said Northbrook. "It's about helping others and making a difference."

In January of 2006, Northbrook was thrown from his bike and severed his spinal cord, which left him paralyzed from the chest down. It was considered a miracle that the married father of two was able to survive.

"I really did not dwell on the past, it's not my personality," said Northbrook. "I

could have had a pity party for one but I moved on and made the best of what I've got. I was never a big complainer."

Even during his own rehabilitation, Northbrook was already thinking about ways to help others who were in a similar situation. He said he was lucky; he had lots of support from family and friends and financially he knew he would be OK. But he knew others might have a more difficult time. According to the National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, first year expenses for a paraplegic are \$270,913. Average first-year expenses for a quadriplegic can run from \$478,782 to \$741,425. In addition to the financial burdens, sudden injuries such as SCI can be incredibly traumatic and confusing.

Just one month after his accident he created his foundation to support others by sharing what he and his family learned in such a challenging time. Northbrook helped his first foundation recipient while he was still in the hospital himself. HeadNorth gave \$15,000 toward adaptive equipment to a 24-year-old who'd had a rare spinal cord stroke

that left him a quadriplegic.

"Even when he was in rehab, Eric saw a real need," said Randal Schober, executive director of HeadNorth. "He saw that there were people less fortunate than he was."

Since 2006, Northbrook has enjoyed watching his foundation grow, meeting survivors that he's helped as well as speaking with the research scientists who seek the cure. He enjoys being able to share his experiences with other SCI survivors. He tells them, "Life does go on. It may be difficult but life is how you choose it to be."

Schober, a Solana Beach resident, joined the foundation as executive director in June of 2007. The Australian import with a doctorate in exercise physiology says he's happy as a "pig in mud" working for HeadNorth.

"I'm an educator and caregiver at heart, what better career choice is there than to work for a non-profit that's helping people who really need it and appreciate it," said Schober. "It was an easy fit."

HeadNorth operates with two major responses to meet SCI survivors' needs.

Their response one program is designed to meet the immediate inpatient needs of an SCI survivor. Within 30 days of an injury, they can provide a grant to be used any way be it funding transportation and lodging for family members, educational

resources or in-hospital counseling.

"It's an extremely difficult transition," Schober said of the time immediately following an accident.

Not only does the patient need lots of support from family and friends but also their home has to be retrofitted with things like wheelchair ramps and lifts to meet their needs when they get out the hospital. HeadNorth seeks to take a shoulder a little of that burden by providing immediate financial support as well as preparing families for the road ahead by giving them necessary resources.

The response two program was created reflecting Northbrook's own desire to continue to redefine what is possible for him and other SPI survivors. Response two is a \$10,000 grant that provides assistance to purchase adaptive equipment and tools to help survivors continue leading an active lifestyle.

"A lot of them don't realize what's out there for them," Schober said.

Northbrook's latest accomplishment is skiing on his own. It took him 20 lessons

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COURTESY HEAD NORTH FOUNDATION

**Through his HeadNorth Foundation, founder Eric Northbrook (right) was able to provide a converted van for recipient Scott Slade.**

and two years to figure out the use of an adaptive ski called the mono-ski but he did it.

"That is really driving me," said Northbrook. "I go out there and ski with my wife and kids and that's something that's just an incredible feeling."

HeadNorth has provided voice-activated software can help a person compose an e-mail if they can't use their hands to type. They have given converted vans that can accommodate wheel chairs and hand cycles that have helped survivors ride a bike again. Survivors have played tennis, gone skiing and last month, the foundation participated in an event in which survivors surfed La Jolla. The Life Rolls On Foundation put on the event, called They Will Surf Again. Using adaptive surfboards and volunteers, they put on surfing events all over the country such as last month's at La Jolla Shores.

"It's just inspiring to see people out there surfing, feeling the freedom of surfing" said Schober. "It's something we just take for granted."

Their partnership with foundations like Life Rolls On is something HeadNorth really values.

"As a foundation, we are stronger collec-

tively than we are individually," Schober said, noting there is a strong referral system between like foundations that provides a unique network for the SCI community.

Of course, another main facet of the foundation is supporting the pursuit of a cure for paralysis. They support research locally, specifically at The School of Medicine at UCSD. Last year, they gave \$50,000 to UCSD's Center for Neural Repair's spinal cord regeneration and research program.

The foundation understands that while SCI survivors might not be able to walk again, research has been able to provide improved quality of life.

"It doesn't mean they'll be dancing, but it could make a world of difference for somebody," said Schober. "Little steps can make a huge impact."

As HeadNorth is largely volunteer-driven, they are always looking for people to help out. For information on volunteering, visit [headnorth.org](http://headnorth.org). Additionally, they have an upcoming fundraising event on June 17, their third annual golf tournament at The Crosby at Rancho Santa Fe. They are still looking for both participants and sponsors. If interested in the event, visit [headnorth.org/golf](http://headnorth.org/golf).