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Moving Ahead

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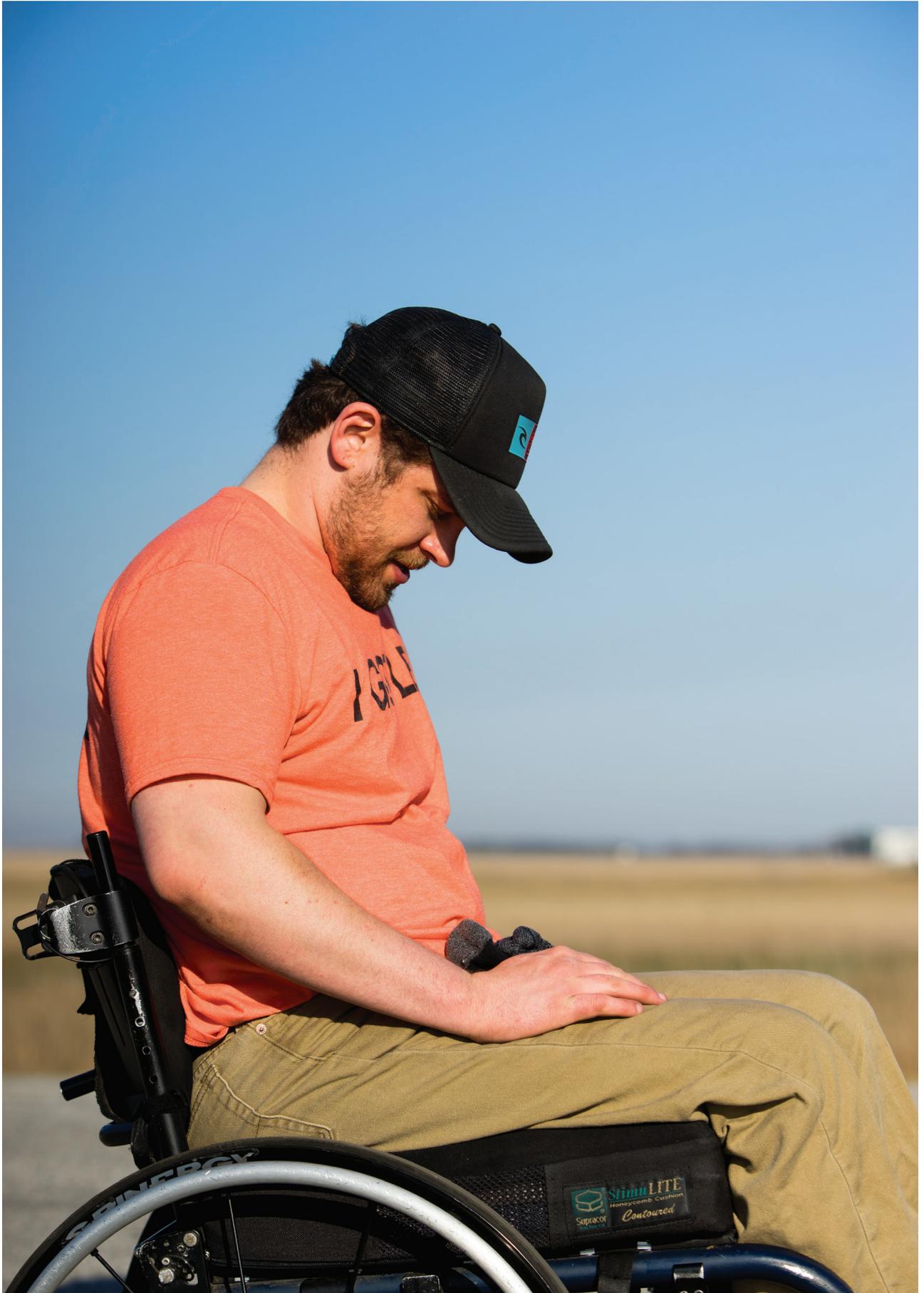


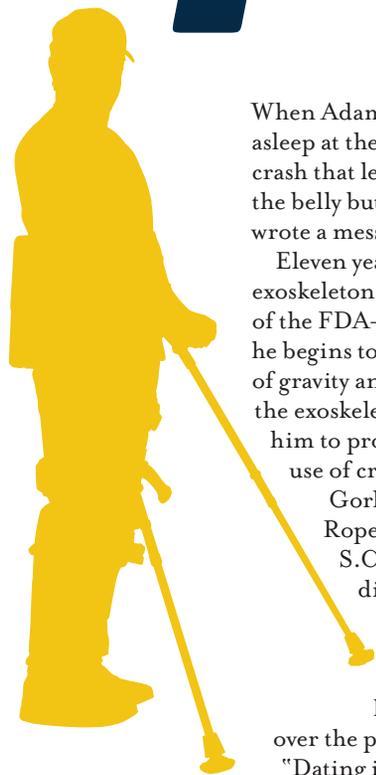
Photo by John Barnhardt

Redefining Purpose

The same ReWalk™ robotic exoskeleton that is helping Adam Gorlitsky, **SOUTH CAROLINA 2008**, walk again also forced him to face his insecurities.

**Story by
Susan Lorimor**

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John Barnhardt**



When Adam Gorlitsky, **SOUTH CAROLINA 2008**, fell asleep at the wheel in 2005 and was injured in a car crash that left him in the hospital, paralyzed from the belly button down and with a tracheostomy, he wrote a message on a clipboard: "I will walk again."

Eleven years later, he is walking with a ReWalk™ exoskeleton. Gorlitsky straps the leg braces and harness of the FDA-approved exoskeleton onto himself; when he begins to move, sensors detect shifts in his center of gravity and upper-body movements. This powers the exoskeleton's motorized leg joints, helping him to propel himself forward with the use of crutches.

Gorlitsky agreed at the end of July 2015 at Roper Rehabilitation Hospital in Charleston, S.C., to try the exoskeleton, after he suffered disappointment with a work project and in his personal life. His girlfriend had just broken up with him because she could not see a future with him because of his disability – a pattern that he has seen over the past several years.

"Dating is a little tough," he says. " ... [Often] six to 12 months go by and then someone says, 'I can't do this with you not walking.'"

While Gorlitsky says he has grown through each experience, he had enough this past summer, when rehab center professionals suggested he try the exoskeleton. He wanted to one day have a family, and believed he needed to walk again to sustain a relationship so he could do so.

ReWalk™ Robotics delivered the exoskeleton to him at Roper Rehabilitation Hospital on Dec. 30, 2015,



Adam Gorlitsky,
SOUTH CAROLINA
2008, pauses on
March 1, 2016, while
in his ReWalk™
exoskeleton at the old
Pitt Street bridge park
in Mt. Pleasant, S.C.
Gorlitsky severed his
spinal cord in a
Dec. 30, 2005,
car accident.
Doctors told
him he would
never walk
again, but
he is doing
so with his
exoskeleton.



The hands of Adam Gortlitsky, **SOUTH CAROLINA 2008**, grasp his wheelchair as he sits in the area surrounding the old Pitt Street bridge in Mt. Pleasant, S.C., on March 1, 2016.

The first time Gortlitsky was in the exoskeleton, he was wobbly. He could not feel the ground to sense where he was stepping, and it was challenging to find his balance. Yet, the ability to stand in the exoskeleton was freeing, and it released suppressed emotions.

a decade after the accident that left him paralyzed. The piece of equipment is now on loan to him from the hospital, while he raises the \$80,000 to buy it.

At the time of the delivery, he said in a news release, "Words cannot describe how much I want to hug a girlfriend standing up, or just talk with someone at eye level. With ReWalk™, I can do those things — things I never thought I would — again."

The first time Gortlitsky was in the exoskeleton, he was wobbly. He could not feel the ground to sense where he was stepping, and it was challenging to find his balance. Yet, the ability to stand in the exoskeleton was freeing, and it released suppressed emotions.

It brought back memories of the disappointments he had suffered with work and the ending of relationships.

"When someone says, 'I can't do [this] with your injury,' you're like, 'I can't do anything about it.' Then I got mad at the world," Gortlitsky says.

Life-altering injuries

Gortlitsky was 19 when he was paralyzed. He was driving home from Columbia, S.C., where he had been moving into a new apartment he was going to share with chapter brother Hunter Williams, **2007**, and other friends. Williams says Gortlitsky was three miles from his family's place in Charleston, S.C., when he crashed along Interstate 26.

"He ran off an embankment and was thrown into the backseat," says Williams, adding that a driver traveling in the

opposite direction saw Gortlitsky crash and called the police.

Gortlitsky was taken to the hospital, and Williams says that he and others could not recognize him as he lay in his bed, tubes everywhere. "It was pretty emotional [to be there]," Williams says. "He was literally lifeless and swollen."

After Gortlitsky was in intensive care for two to three weeks, he says he was airlifted to Shepherd Center in Atlanta, which specializes in treatment and rehabilitation of those with spinal cord and brain injuries. It was there that Gortlitsky had what he says patients call "judgment day," when doctors took him aside and told him that he had severed his spinal cord and would never walk again. "I took it obviously very hard," Gortlitsky says. "I was in tears a lot at first."

He took a semester off from school, and fortunately the loft-style apartment that he and his friends had rented was accessible. When he moved into the apartment, he was able to get around in it with his wheelchair. He saw his disability as a physical challenge, and his friends did not treat him any differently than they had before.

Gortlitsky continued to go out with his friends while in college; they went on spring break together, and he tried to have as normal a life as possible. It was during this time, Williams says, that Gortlitsky got sympathy from women who saw that his buddies were not giving special treatment to him because he was disabled. Instead, they made him wheel across the room to get his own drinks and grab a bowl or turn down the air conditioner in the apartment on his own.

"We never babied him or anything," Williams says.

Following the accident, Gortlitsky was forced to redefine himself. A high school basketball player, he had already left his playing days when he graduated, but he always considered himself an athlete. Now paralyzed, he focused on completing his marketing major while in college, and after graduation, he worked on a career in filmmaking and entrepreneurship.

A changed perspective

In recent months, Gortlitsky also founded a nonprofit organization,



The wheelchair of Adam Gorlitsky, SOUTH CAROLINA 2008, sits behind in the area surrounding the old Pitt Street bridge in Mt. Pleasant, S.C., on March 1, 2016, as he prepares to walk in his ReWalk™ robotic exoskeleton.

I Got Legs, as he raised money for the exoskeleton through a gofundme.com campaign. He also generates funds through the sale of T-shirts emblazoned with "I Got Legs," and Williams' sister, publicist Whitney Williams, is helping to spread word of Gorlitsky's cause.

She became close friends with Gorlitsky as she began to work with his nonprofit organization. Since then, Whitney Williams has helped arrange fundraisers for Gorlitsky in Charleston, S.C., and has contacted publicists for well-known entertainers, whose clients have agreed to wear an I Got Legs shirt and create visibility for the cause.

For Whitney Williams, the work brings personal reward. She was three years ahead of Gortlitsky in college, and saw how her brother and the other men rallied around him.

"It was neat for me to see ... how tight-knit they were at getting through this together," she says.

Now, she and Gorlitsky have developed a close friendship, and she is protective of him when he faces heartbreak and when people want to enter or re-enter his life now that he is walking. She does not want to see him get hurt again.

She says that Gorlitsky is well-known in Charleston, S.C., and is receiving attention nationwide. For Gorlitsky, the notoriety brings awareness to his efforts to help empower and connect people of all disabilities. He wants to bridge the gap between what it means to be disabled and able-bodied.

Since his accident, he has heard from others about their personal

struggles. They may be grieving the loss of a mother or father or healing from another psychological wound. "We're all so emotionally connected," Gorlitsky says. "You find the way they overcame [adversity] and apply that to your life."

Gorlitsky admits that he had to focus upon his pain, so that he could move forward. "My life changed when I looked myself in the mirror and said, 'What am I insecure and vulnerable about?,' and I went ahead and made a change," he says. "For me [what I am vulnerable about] is my body. I turned it into a strength."

And so, with the help of trainers who are donating their time to help him prepare his body, he is strengthening his hip and ab muscles so that he can walk two 10K races in coming months. He planned to take part in the April 2 Cooper River Bridge Run, which stretches from Mount Pleasant, S.C., to Charleston, S.C. He is also looking forward to walking the AJC Peachtree Road Race on July 4 in Atlanta.

Gorlitsky realizes that he may not complete the races in one day, because each has an allotted time in which it needs to be finished. He plans to go back to where he left the races and complete them the next day if necessary.

As for his motivation to walk, it has altered.

"Now I'm doing this because I want to instead of needing to," Gorlitsky says.

"We're all so emotionally connected," says Gorlitsky, who has heard from others about their personal struggles in the years following his accident. "You find the way they overcame [adversity] and apply that to your life."

