

CITIZEN PROFILE

Ex-firefighter longs to help others again

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Growing up in Southern California, Tom Hampton excelled at the sports that would ultimately shape his life – snow skiing, water skiing and surfing. He played football for 10 years and received his Red Cross advanced first-aid card at 13 so he could be on the National Ski Patrol as a junior patrolman.

The taste of rescue led him to a career as a firefighter. For 30 years, he was able to help others in dire situations.

He began paragliding at 45, advancing to the top of the sport and becoming a tandem instructor with the U.S. Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association.

But one sunny day in August 2007, after seven years of flying, he crashed. The injuries he suffered from his 50-foot fall from the sky changed his life forever. But he hasn't given up.

Here's a closer look:

Q. What injuries did you suffer?

A. I suffered multiple fractures, head trauma and serious injury to my spinal cord. Not only did I lose participation in all my physical sports, this would be the accident that ended my beloved career in the fire service.

Q. What was recovery like?

A. The two weeks I lay unconscious in the ICU fighting for my life put my wife, Patricia, through something I would not wish on anyone. Patricia has been by my side supporting me through it all – the first three weeks in the hospital, followed by another month in an acute inpatient rehabilitation facility, then starting outpatient physical therapy three days a week to rebuild my broken body. Six months post-injury, we found Project Walk (a Carlsbad-based nonprofit organization that provides exercise-based recovery programs, education and support for people with spinal-cord injuries).

Q. How has Project Walk helped?

A. It has given me hope, motivation and guided the rebuilding of my strength and mobility. Training at Project Walk has helped me to grow both physically and emotionally. I feel I will be able to help others again someday. Project Walk's program and philosophy are unique and just not available anywhere



Tom Hampton of San Clemente, who suffered a spinal-cord injury in a paragliding accident in 2007, is pictured at the Grand Canyon on his recumbent cycle. > COURTESY PHOTO

Tom Hampton

Age: 53

Born and raised: Downey; Manhattan Beach

Would like to have met: "Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir, because of their great vision and contribution to preserving the great wilderness areas of the United States for all Americans."

Favorite quotes: "Leave it better than you find it," and "Those that do have the say."

Hobbies/spare time: working out to regain his abilities

In five years: wants to be walking unassisted, hand in hand with his wife

Motto: "Work hard, be respectful and flavor as much life as you can, because you never know when it will change."

else.

Q. What's the message to others you want to send?

A. No matter how determined you are or how hard you work, you cannot rush or hurry nerve regeneration. But you can condition your muscles to fight off

atrophy and to stimulate the nerves, giving them a path to rebuild. My body seems to continue to regularly regain sensation and function. I have been working out at Project Walk for 1½ years in two-hour sessions two days each week. Project Walk has opened my eyes to hope and strength, giving me an opportunity to inspire people around me.

Q. What's ahead?

A. There is no greater feeling or reward than to save someone's life. I strive for the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives again. I've never been a person big on crowds or fanfare, but my rock-solid desire to help others has always been true.