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APO Practitioner Got the Call; Never Looked Back

If it hadn't been for a fortuitous phone call in 2001, Nick Ackerman's life might well have taken a completely different course, and a talented, young prosthetic & orthotic practitioner might not have found his true calling.

Nick was only 18-months old when his legs were amputated below the knees

to halt the spread of bacterial meningitis through his body. For the next 22 years, American Prosthetics & Orthotics' Gary Cheney, CPO, FAAOP, made Nick's prosthetic legs for him – all except for the last pair. Nick made those himself.

Nick is now Gary's colleague at APO, and, having completed his schooling and residency, is just a short time away from receiving his ABC certification. He's awaiting the results of one exam and waiting to take another. Although he and Gary work in different offices – Nick in Davenport and Gary in Clive – Gary's approach to patient care has left an indelible mark on Nick.

"He's my mentor – my idol, I guess, in the field," Nick said. "I look to achieve his level of success in patient care. He has always had a genuine concern for my getting around and letting me do what I wanted to do."

Until he was about 10, Nick had been wear-



Nick Ackerman enjoys working with patients to get them up and walking.

ing SACH (solid-ankle, cushion-heel) feet. He had always been an active child, but then Gary fitted him with Flex Feet™ and Nick's been on the go ever since.

"They'd spring and react to me," Nick said. "They weren't just virtual boards. They were very dynamic. It put me on my way. From then on I was wrestling and playing football and basketball."

"One of the things I remember most vividly," Gary said, "was that one of the things he couldn't do in the SACH feet was jumping jacks. That was one of the first things he wanted to try. We videotaped him doing it. He just thought it was the greatest thing."

After high school, Nick went on to study environmental biology in college with an eye towards

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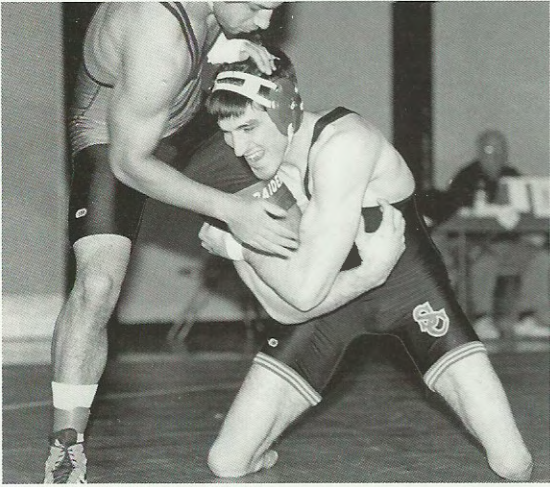
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Nick in his wrestling days at Simpson College

forestry. At the same time he became a champion wrestler, winning the 2001 NCAA Division III Wrestling Championship in his weight class and earning a lot of attention. In the four weeks between winning the championship and his graduation, there were numerous calls and press interviews. Nick was featured on the Today Show, in USA Today, and in various other media outlets.

Two weeks before his graduation, Nick received a phone call from someone who had read about him in USA Today. "He didn't know how to begin," Nick remembers. "I said, 'Ask me anything you want. You're not going to offend me.'"

The caller's name was Chris, a 19-year-old from Texas. He had been in a car accident. They had amputated one of his legs and might have to amputate the other.

Nick, who had lost his legs at such an early age, wasn't sure what to tell him. "I told him, 'I don't know what you're going through. You've got two options: you can either go on or not.'"

"We ended up talking for about two hours. We talked about everything. 'Can you wear normal underwear?' 'Can you ski?' 'Can you drive?' 'What do girls think about it?' These are logical questions any 19-year-old would have. You lose your leg and you think your world is upside down."

By the time the conversation ended, Nick's life had been changed.

"In two weeks I was going to get a degree in biology and work for the state park service as a ranger...[Then] I got that

phone call and it was clear what I was going to do with my life. This kid had never seen anyone with an amputation getting around and doing what he needs to do. Everyone who knows me will say it [his amputation] isn't a big deal. 'He was just as crazy as everybody else.' But this kid never met someone like that. He needs to see it. You can't just tell him over the phone.

"I called Gary the next day and asked him to hire me. I said, 'This is what I want to do.'"

Nick worked as a technician at APO, learning the technical aspects of the work, completed the certification program at Northwestern University, and returned to APO to do his residency while waiting to complete the certification process.

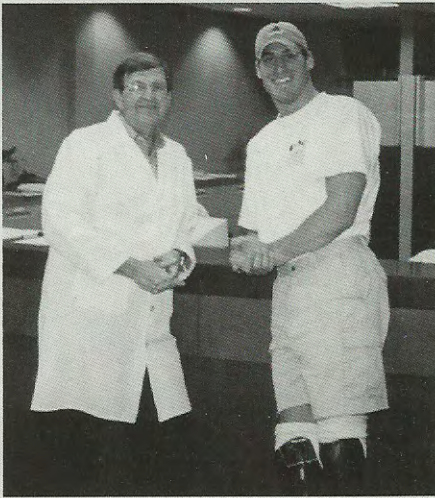
"Nick never needed time to find himself," Gary said. "He immediately started working and never turned back. He's given it 100% each day."

Although Nick lost both his legs below the knees at such an early age, it's not his experience as an amputee that guides his approach to patients – "He's had prostheses since he was a baby, so he thinks they're fairly normal," said John Kamp, CPO, who works with Nick at the Davenport office. Rather, it's been Nick's experience with Gary, whom he describes as "exceptional," and his working and training with practitioners like John that has helped Nick set his standards for patient care.

"I never think that because I don't have legs,



Nick still journeys to the woods on the weekend.



Nick with Gary Cheney, CPO.

I know how someone else is feeling,” Nick said. “Gary has both of his legs and he’s the best practitioner I ever met. He’s absolutely awesome, just a sincere compassionate person. What I learned from him is as long as I’m sincere with everybody and do the best that I can, that’s all I can do.

“I don’t try to tell a patient that I know what he’s going through. But I can tell him, ‘It’s going to be fine. You’re going to be ok. It’s going to set you back a few months. You’ll have to learn to do a couple of things differently, but it doesn’t define who you are.’”

According to John, Nick, having been both patient and practitioner, learned from everybody. “He’s learned an awful lot about treating the whole person, not just the artificial limb. When you combine that with a thorough knowledge of prosthetics, it’s a pretty solid background.

“When patients come to see him, they find a really upbeat, confident, and experienced practitioner. They also see a very functional guy with both of his legs gone and they can be encouraged that wearing prostheses doesn’t mean their lives are over. His patients almost always leave feeling enthused about their future.”

Nick knows, as well as anyone could, that wearing a prosthesis doesn’t mean one’s life is over. He’s always been a functional, active person. So active, in fact, that according to Gary, keeping Nick’s prostheses in working condition was his biggest challenge when Nick was growing. “There really wasn’t anything Nick wouldn’t try.”

“I was breaking them [the Flex Feet],” Nick said. “Gary had to be saying to himself, ‘How do you keep breaking these? They’re made from the toughest materials in the world.’ Now I have patients like that and it’s one of the awesome things about our jobs.

“As a practitioner,” Nick said, “I never want any of my patients to think of their prosthesis as a down factor. My goal is to not have the prostheses

slow them up. You know the young ones will do well. They’re active. But sometimes people get mad at the world. When you get to watch those people realize that they can move on, it’s very rewarding. I just love those patients who are about to give up on the whole thing and you get a leg under them and their whole attitude and mindset changes.”

“Nick,” John said, “told me how he used to get an adrenaline rush when he was a wrestler, now when he’s doing something that will help someone walk, he gets that same type of feeling.”

Nick has no regrets – “None at all” – about his decision to pass up a career in forestry for one in prosthetics. “I was going to live in a state park. Raise a family there. I could have taken off whenever I wanted to, worked on my own schedule. When I worked there during my summers, I said, ‘I’m never going to work indoors. This kid does not go inside.’

“Then I got that phone call and everything changed. Being indoors isn’t so bad. I can still enjoy the weekend, and I get to help hundreds of people. That’s the thing about this field. It’s not like a dentist, where people don’t always want to see him, or like a doctor where you might not want to see him because he might have bad news. The

“I’d work inside every day of my life to have the reward of having someone get up, get walking, and get back to doing what they want to do.”

— Nick Ackerman

prosthetist always has good news. Our goal is to get you walking and we’re going to. If it’s sore in some spots, we’re going to fix it. Patients want to see you because they want to get going.”

The forest, he knows, will still be there on weekends and after work and, he said, “I still get the benefits of helping hundreds of people. I’d work inside everyday of my life to have the reward of having someone get up, get walking, and get back to doing what they want to do.”