

Rudy Rudy Garcia-Tolson

Born with pterygium syndrome, Rudy Garcia-Tolson was confined to a wheelchair. By his fifth birthday, he had undergone 15 operations to correct several orthopaedic abnormalities and other conditions stemming from his disease. But all the procedures did not succeed in helping Rudy walk. Loma Linda University Medical Center specialists determined Rudy had two options. He could either remain in his wheelchair or his legs could be amputated so he could be fitted with prostheses. For a child who had endured so much, Rudy was ready for a change. "Cut off my legs. I want to walk," 5-year-old Rudy told James E. Shook, M.D., his orthopaedic surgeon. As he was being wheeled into the operating room, Rudy assured his mom he would be walking. Dr. Shook also reassured Rudy's parents, "He's special, and he's going to be somebody."

On March 7, 2002, Rudy stood confidently before 50,000 people at the opening ceremony of the 2002 Paralympics. With an unwavering voice he began, "My spirit is happy and fun. More than anything, it proves people wrong," remarked Rudy. "My spirit will not fade because it doesn't hear the words 'no,' 'can't,' or 'never'. Instead it shows me anything is possible!" the young athlete said emphatically.

Mike Davidson, the certified prosthetist orthotist at Loma Linda University Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Institute who fits Rudy's prostheses, says the boy has helped many patients who have witnessed his determination and courage. "We call walking from the chair to the sink successful," Mr. Davidson explains. "Rudy forced us to think outside the box."

"We have no words to express our thanks to Dr. Shook and the other specialists who have worked with Rudy," says his mother, Sandy. Loma Linda clinicians have helped Rudy meet life's challenges and accomplish amazing achievements.

Rudy is recognized internationally as a top competitor. He holds American records in both swimming and in the half-marathon. He has completed four triathlons, which include swimming, cycling, and running events, by himself. Rudy sometimes teams with his good friend, actor Robin Williams, to participate in charity events. The two companions share equal admiration for each other and believe each is the other's hero.

Knowing Rudy met the criteria to carry the Olympic torch, Mr. Williams nominated him on the basis of his ability to inspire others to greater achievement. He inspires his community, embodies the inspirational spirit of the Olympic movement, and motivates others by encountering and overcoming adversity.

On January 18, 2002, the Paralympic hopeful carried the torch up a steep street in San Francisco while his family and Mr. Williams cheered. Rudy didn't feel the chill in the evening air because his fire was burning brightly within. "My fire shines from my heart," Rudy explains. "My motto is a brave heart is a powerful weapon. And my spirit thinks I am a regular boy and an athlete because when I run I can feel my spirit soar."

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Willie Stewart

For the first time in Olympic history, a United States ski team, able-bodied or disabled, had medaled in the 3 x 5 Nordic relay, and Willie Stewart felt like a champion as his silver medal was placed around his neck. Skiing the second leg of the relay during Salt Lake City's 2002 Paralympic Games, Willie's five kilometers flew by. As his third teammate began his portion of the cross-country race, the U.S. team knew they were making history. Finishing behind the favored Russians by less than two seconds, the American team felt a tremendous sense of achievement. "I've always loved what the Olympics stand for," acknowledges Willie. "It's a time when the whole world puts down arms and is at peace while countries settle differences through athletic endeavors. The Olympic torch is another phenomenal and powerful symbol for me," says Willie.

Before the start of the 2002 winter games, Willie ran with the Olympic torch on two occasions. His first run was in the nation's capital. "More than a thousand kids watched as I carried the torch past my nephew's elementary school," grins Willie. "I was thrilled my family and friends were there to share the moment." Willie, then 40-years-old, continued to the White House where torchbearers were greeted by the President of the United States at an official ceremony. Willie carried the torch again in California on its way to the winter games.

The 2002 Olympic medals bear the inscription, "Light the fire within." Athleticism fuels the fire in Willie. He became the first disabled person in the world to enter and complete an adventure race. Over a span of four days, athletes raced 24-hours a day in adverse conditions. Willie's team pushed their ultimate limits as they kayaked, mountain biked, and navigated through treacherous terrain.

Adversity is something Willie has conquered more than once. Still relishing his Virginia state wrestling title, the high school graduate took a summer roofing job in Washington, D.C. Working atop the Watergate building, something went suddenly wrong. Willie felt his arm being jerked as it became entangled in a rope caught in an air conditioning fan. Thinking he had severely broken his arm, he looked down to see his arm was no longer there.

Since the accident, Willie has become a huge advocate of sports and rehabilitation. "My passion is being an outspoken advocate for the disabled," he comments. "I didn't realize what an impact someone who overcomes disability can have on others. I have realized I can empower people not by what I say but what I do."

Willie has become a key strategist in the expansion of Loma Linda University Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Institute. "This is an incredible rehabilitation center," says Willie enthusiastically. "I am going to help raise awareness across the United States about our Institute. When you take a weaker part of your community and make it stronger, you have strengthened your society. This is what Rehabilitation Institute is going to do – build a stronger community."

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Christopher Melin

Christopher Eugene Melin was born in Portland, Oregon, on August 20, 1948, and went to be with our Lord on November 27, 2008, at the age of 60. He served as a supply sergeant in the Vietnam Era on the DMZ in Korea, often risking his life obtaining weapons, food, and essential building supplies for the bridge being constructed on the Injun River in 1968 and 1969. Chris passed on due to complications from Agent Orange. Chris graduated from Azusa Pacific College and spent more than 30 years counseling youth in Southern and Central California. He was also trained by two police academies and served as sheriff in Iowa. Over the last three years, Chris volunteered more than 1,000 hours at the Department of Veteran Affairs hospital in Long Beach, CA, for which he received a letter of recommendation from President George W. Bush. Chris was known as a man of hope, and as a man who believed in beating the odds and living every minute with gusto and enthusiasm. This belief was based in his deep faith in Jesus Christ. He was a man of encouraging words, and he constantly strived to make people see that somehow their problems could be overcome.

Even though he was an amputee resulting from Agent Orange exposure, he was able to ski in Aspen, CO; play wheelchair basketball; play guitar, sing, and write poetry, as well as run in several 5K marathons. Chris' recent success was winning a bronze medal in swimming at the National Golden Age Olympics in Indianapolis, IN, in August 2008. From triathlons to marathons, Chris was there on the frontlines as a proud PossAbilities member. He will be remembered as a man of God who spoke the Bible as freely as anyone could, knowing the Word of God and having a passage from Scripture for every situation. Those who met Chris will never forget him.

Hall of Heroes

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Abbey Umali

Abbey was born with a form of Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease a condition that affects her nerves and muscles. Essentially, Abbey's body cannot produce enough myelin, which means that her muscles don't hear the message from her nerves quite loud enough. Because her muscles are weak Abbey uses braces to help her walk. She also has trouble balancing so she falls down a lot. However, Abbey is working really hard in physical therapy to make her muscles stronger and her balance better.

Despite the physical challenges brought about by her disease Abbey is a bright, energetic 12 year old. After school Abbey stays very busy reading, singing, swimming, dancing, riding her bike, and spending time with friends. She also plays the piano and loves to act.

Abbey's smile reflects the warmth and love she has in her heart for animals. Abbey says that when she grows up she wants to become a veterinarian and work for the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA). In the meanwhile Abbey enjoys spending time with her loving and supportive family. She describes her family as being "really fun" because they make each other laugh a lot. Abbey's mother, Wendy, is a physical therapist who helps Abbey with her physical exercises. Abbey's father, Joel, is a dentist and enjoys practicing piano with Abbey. The Umalis enjoy doing things together as a family like going to church, traveling, watching movies, and playing games.

In 2006 and 2007, Abbey served as the Muscular Dystrophy Association's Goodwill Ambassador for California. Her Ambassador duties took her across the state educating people about MDA's ongoing research to find a cure for Muscular Dystrophy. Abbey has appeared on TV for five years and counting, telling people all over the world her story. Abbey's message to the world is, "that there is hope for people with muscular dystrophy because of people with generous hearts".

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Delmon Dunston

On July 14, 2000, Delmon Dunston was practicing wrestling moves with a friend, performing a double leg take down when his head hit his grappling partner's hip. The force from the move shattered his sixth vertebrae in his neck. After the accident, Del was rushed to Loma Linda University Medical Center where doctors discovered that he not only shattered his vertebrae but injured his spinal cord as well. As a result of the injuries sustained, Del was paralyzed from the chest down.

For two years after the accident Del tried to piece his life back together. Then in August 2003, Del was asked by a friend to attend a wheelchair rugby demo. Seeing all of the people who had suffered similar injuries, competing again, inspired Del. Rugby became the spark that was needed to reignite his competitive fire. Del wasted no time, with the help of the accessible gym equipment provided by the PossAbilities program at the Drayson Center. He turned those long discouraging days into training sessions. "It was like I was given a purpose again, not only to better myself, but inspire others who are trying to find their way as a newly disabled individual".

Since then, Del not only does peer support at LLUMC, he has gone on to become a spokesman for internationally renowned fashion designer Kenneth Cole. He has competed on the USQRA National Team, played on the D II National Championship team, managed the Crown Rugby team, and was invited to try out for the United States Olympic team in 2005, 2006, and 2007. His future goals are to compete in triathlons, make the World Champion Rugby Team in 2010, compete in the 2012 US Paralympic games in London, and continue as an advocate for PossAbilities on their Speaker's Bureau.

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Eric Arrington

Growing up in Compton, California, sports were my life. Football, baseball, basketball — I had a passion for them all. A strong desire to succeed in these sports occupied the majority of my time. I also had another desire as a child and that was to be able to ride in a jet plane. I remember asking my mom one day if I would ever be able to ride in a jet plane. Her response has been a motivation for many of my successes in life. She replied, “All young men that go to college and become professional athletes get to ride in those planes.” So, my mind was set. I was going to college to become a professional athlete. After graduating from Compton High School, I attended Harbor Community College (HCC) to play football. While at HCC, I was named a Junior All-American Outside Linebacker. This gave me the opportunity to earn a spot on Grambling State University’s football team, a NCAA Division I school. As a Grambling Tiger, I played well enough to receive an invitation to tryout for the Los Angeles Raiders. It wouldn’t be easy, but I wanted to accomplish two things — to make the team and to get a chance to ride on a plane. I did get a chance to ride on a plane, but I did not make the team and was released from the Raiders.

As fate would have it, I was good enough to make an Arena Football team and gained enormous experience in the AFL. That experience gave me a second invitation to tryout with the Raiders and a second opportunity to play in the NFL. That opportunity came to a screeching halt when, celebrating the second invitation with friends, I was shot six times in the back. This was bittersweet to me because in the process of being shot, I protected a friend from being injured or killed. This confrontation left me paralyzed from the waist down and in a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

With time, support, and love from my family, I’ve learned to embrace the unique gift that God has provided me. I thank Him everyday for a second chance. I may be paralyzed and in a wheelchair, but this is minor to me. I have the wonderful opportunity to enjoy life to it’s fullest. We all have many choices in life, and in the 19 years since my injury, I’ve chosen to help young people in our community. This is now my passion. I still enjoy football, baseball, and basketball, but now am able to pass on my experience and perspective on life through coaching. I’ve had the good fortune of coaching four football championship teams at the Junior College level, as well as winning a championship at the NCAA Division III level. I’ve learned that in life, it’s not what you go through, but it’s how you go through it.

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Joe Tinker

Joe Tinker

A simple slip on a walk-in freezer floor turned Joe Tinker's life literally upside down. A main artery in his leg was destroyed, and he endured more than 30 arterial bypass surgeries. Eventually, the leg had to be amputated, and later he lost the other leg as well.

Joe dealt with years of pain and depression. Then, 12 years after his accident, he joined the PossAbilities program at Loma Linda University Medical Center East Campus Hospital. The free program provides to persons with permanent disabilities the social, recreational, and motivational support and resources to help them get back into mainstream life.

Out of curiosity, Joe came out in June 2003, to watch Rudy's Braveheart Triathlon, named in honor of Rudy Tolson-Garcia, a teenaged double-amputee athlete. Seeing the disabled athletes racing alongside everyone else encouraged Joe to get in shape himself. He got a lot of support from the PossAbilities staff and members. Nine months later, he entered—and completed—the 2004 PossAbilities Triathlon in Loma Linda.

Less than a year later, at 38 years of age and just two months after his wedding, Joe died in his sleep. In a new twist on organ donation, Joe's parents decided to donate his three pairs of prosthetic legs, including an ultra-modern computerized pair, to Loma Linda University Medical Center. Their hope is that someone else's life can take a turn for the better, as Joe's did, by having the opportunity to be more active. "He walked because of Loma Linda," said Joe's mother, Nancy, who says he walked down the aisle at his wedding wearing one of the pairs of legs. Now, she added, "somebody else needs to walk."

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Emmanuel Yeboah

When Emmanuel was born, polio attacked his frail body, resulting in a deformed right leg that would never develop properly. He became part of a large population of physically challenged people in Koforidua, Ghana. As he got older, he noticed several disabled people begging on the streets to survive. Feelings of sympathy ignited a passion inside of him to make a difference. He knew if he could be successful, despite his disability, others would realize they too could be, regardless of their own circumstances.

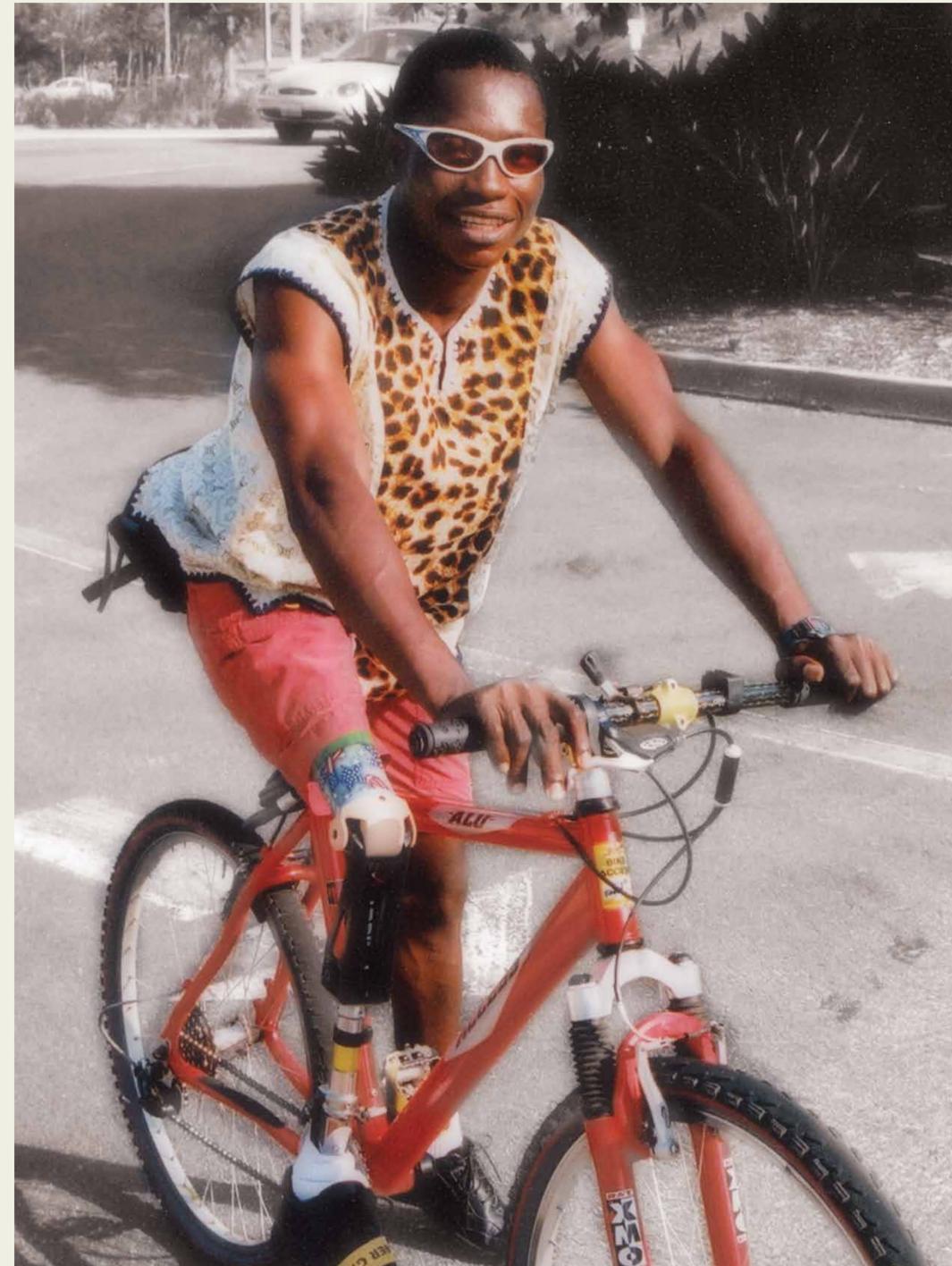
Emmanuel made his first attempt to ride a bike at 12, and after a few months of trying to master the art of balancing, Emmanuel was ready to hit the open road. Earning two dollars a day from his job as a shoemaker, he saved up \$100 to buy a small bicycle of his very own. Emmanuel later began taking trips on his bike to raise awareness about the physically challenged. On his first journey, Emmanuel traveled more than 50 miles. He figured if people saw him travel so far, without the ability to use both legs, they would realize anything was possible.

Emmanuel's zealous spirit led him to the Challenged Athlete's Foundation (CAF), an organization that sponsors the athletic pursuits of the disabled. He shared his vision to encourage other physically challenged people and asked for a mountain bike to ride across Ghana to fulfill his mission. Not only did the CAF meet his challenge with funds for a bicycle, but they also provided for a new helmet, jersey, and pair of gloves. In September of 2002, Emmanuel took his first ride, pedaling more than 370 miles in 10 days to visit politicians and businesses throughout Ghana as an ambassador for the disabled. The CAF invited Emmanuel to represent their organization as a competitor, giving him the opportunity to attend the San Diego Triathlon Challenge, an event sponsored by the Loma Linda University Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Institute. Emmanuel caught the attention of Michael Jackson, MPH, senior vice president of Loma Linda University Medical Center. Mr. Jackson stated, "It was just obvious that here's a guy who's an amazing person, and with some help, this could be transformational." Having never dreamed of a life with two legs, Emmanuel says, "I was shocked."

Emmanuel had surgery in April of 2003 to remove his deformed leg. His new leg is made of titanium and carbon graphite. The lower half of the prosthesis is made to last a lifetime, while the top half may have to eventually be replaced. He put his new leg to the test at Rudy's BraveHeart Triathlon in July of 2003. He was one of the 16 physically challenged athletes who joined close to 500 able-bodied competitors. Emmanuel says he's proud to compete in a country that's done so much for him. As a token of his appreciation, Emmanuel chose stars and stripes as décor for his prosthetic leg. Emmanuel is determined to help the disabled people of his country, he recently launched a fund in his name to foster education for young disabled students in Ghana.

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Gina Cooper

Recently, Gina Cooper's niece composed a school essay about her aunt. She wrote about how the only thing that has changed is Gina's long hair. "She sees beyond my missing limbs and recognizes I'm still the same person I was before I got sick!" Gina smiles.

"I went to the darkest place in my mind, my spirit and my body, and I came back," Gina says. "I believe with all my heart that I am alive today because when I wanted to roll over and die, the Loma Linda doctors, nurses and my family wouldn't let me."

It was late September, 1998, Hannah was a toddler and baby Emily was only four months old when Gina developed strep throat. Within days, the streptococcus bacteria had attacked Gina's body. She was hospitalized at Loma Linda University Medical Center in serious condition and lost consciousness in the intensive care unit. She remained in a coma for four months. "When I woke up and saw what had happened to me, I thought I'd never get out of the hospital," states Gina. To save her life, portions of all four infected extremities were amputated. When Gina realized she no longer had hands or feet and had lost the ability to hear, she was terrified. She cried as she thought, "I can't lift my arm. I'll never be able to feed myself. I'll never be able to hug my children."

During the remainder of her nine-month hospitalization, therapists at the Loma Linda University Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Institute helped Gina master daily living skills necessary for her independence. Gina, then 35 years old, learned to pour juice, cook breakfast and most importantly, hold and hug her daughters. Gina says, "My spirit kicked in and I started to do things for myself." Gina once read, "When you can't believe the good things about yourself anymore, you reach out to those who remember." She smiles, "I was very fortunate I had loved ones and friends who could remember for me."

After Gina's release, she continued rehabilitation for more than a year. "My therapists would tell me I would be OK, and that I could get through it. Sometimes I didn't believe it was possible, but I always knew they believed in me." Rehabilitation Institute clinicians fitted Gina with prosthetic devices to assist her in a range of activities. Using prosthetic limbs made one very special event possible. On January 15, Gina carried the Olympic torch. Being a torchbearer was an opportunity for Gina to show everyone who had supported her that the fire within her burned brightly.

Gina maintains a loving home for her daughters, she shares, "I don't know any other single moms without any hands and feet, but that doesn't mean I can't hold my head up. My mind and my spirit make me whole. I'm proud of who I am and what I've accomplished."

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Michael Jackson

Michael Jackson came to Loma Linda University Medical Center East Campus (LLUMCEC) in 2001 with the vision of creating a place where patients, families and staff could find hope, healing and transformation. The goal was to bring rehabilitation, orthopaedics and neurosciences to one campus where patients could easily access care in an environment that made them feel at home.

As Michael learned more about the needs of our patients and their families, he started to think about ways to care for them beyond their stay in the hospital. Michael knew that disabilities are isolating. The individuals we serve often become disenfranchised and lose connections they once had to their communities. Michael wanted LLUMCEC to reconnect patients to their communities.

Michael shared his idea to help our patients with a small team, and together, they crafted the vision of PossAbilities, a program that started at the bedside with peer visits and support groups. The community caught the vision and became involved with our PossAbilities Triathlon and Annual Celebration Dinner. PossAbilities became a pioneer in our region for creating opportunities for people who thrive, despite their disabilities, and a meaningful program for community partners to support.

PossAbilities is nearly 10-years-old now and has connected countless members with one another to create hope for the disabled. Michael has been a champion for PossAbilities...but most of all, for the people it serves: Michael believes in the potential of each member with all his heart.

As Michael moves into the next phase of his own life, his retirement, we include him as an honorary member to our Hall of Heroes. He has been our hero as the founder of PossAbilities. We are forever grateful.

Hall of Heroes

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Malek Mohammed

Malek Mohammad, perseverance and determination are what he is made of. Malek lived in Afghanistan his whole life. One day just like any other, Malek was gathering firewood for his family, when unexpectedly he stepped on a landmine. It blew off his right leg and threw him into the air. As he came back down he hit another landmine and ripped off his other leg. Thankfully, soldiers and security officials heard the blasts and came running to help. They took him to a hospital where they amputated both his legs below the knees at the age of 16. Loma Linda University Medical Center (LLUMC) was notified about Malek. They wanted to help and arranged for him to come have surgery. He has undergone extensive surgeries and treatment for burns on his chest and arms. He is currently doing his physical therapy at Loma Linda University Medical Center East Campus. Not only has he learned how to walk with the help of prosthetics, but he can now play his favorite sport soccer again, and he's taken up hand cycling as well. Through Loma Linda University Medical Center and PossAbilities, Malek has stayed involved in all of his favorite activities. He has competed in two triathlons, he loves to swim, lift weights, plays wheelchair basketball, volleyball, tennis, wheelchair rugby and surfing. His physical recovery has been remarkable and his determination shows through in his love for studying and learning new things.

Malek returned to Afghanistan and has continued his education and has learned English. His mind is strong and his determination inspires everyone that crosses his path. He will continue his journey of courage in his hometown as he is surrounded by an ocean of newfound friends.

Malek has made a lasting impression on those whose lives he has touched. He has great hopes of returning to Loma Linda sometime in the future.

Narrated by Bailey Navarro, age 15, PossAbilities support member.

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