

more than
**A GUY
IN A
WHEELCHAIR**



How a **QUADRIPLÉGIC STUDENT**
SURVIVED and THRIVED at **DUKE LAW**
— and PROFOUNDLY AFFECTED his
COMMUNITY ALONG THE WAY

by **MELINDA MYERS VAUGHN**



DANIEL LESLIE GOT A STANDING OVATION FROM MANY OF HIS CLASSMATES WHEN HE CROSSED THE STAGE IN CAMERON INDOOR STADIUM TO RECEIVE HIS DUKE LAW HOOD ON MAY 14.

He received similar applause when he was presented with the Justin Miller Award for citizenship at a graduation gala two nights earlier — recognized by his classmates as one who “celebrates Duke, participates in the Duke community, and exudes a spirit of optimism.”

“I think I speak for everyone in our class when I say that [Daniel] has taught us about life,” said Kristen Wolff ’11, who presented him with the award. “He has taught us to never be too proud to ask for help. He has taught us that asking for help is courageous. He has reminded us that there are things in life that are so much more important than grades and project deadlines. He reminds us to savor life’s blessings.”

For Leslie, graduation was a reminder of life’s possibilities and a momentous marker on a journey that began on a June 2004 evening, when he broke his neck with a dive into the shallow end of a friend’s pool.



**FACING
A NEW
REALITY**

BEFORE THE ACCIDENT, Leslie was an accounting student at Brigham Young University. A native of Evergreen, Colo., he envisioned a life of international work and travel. He had launched his own business developing wireless Internet infrastructure and looked forward to a career as an entrepreneur.

In the immediate aftermath of his accident, Leslie held onto those plans. Though he could not feel his body below his shoulders, he maintained a calm conviction that he would resume his “real life” soon. But after weeks of surgeries, tubes, pain relievers, and complications including pneumonia, blood clots, and partial blindness, Leslie’s doctor made him face his new reality: He would not walk again. He was a quadriplegic.

“I knew this was somehow in God’s plan for me, and that I would be able to accomplish the things I need to accomplish in life,” Leslie recalls. “That hasn’t really wavered. But there have been times when I wanted to give up, when it seemed to be more than I could do. I really relied on my family, my friends, and my faith.

“And who doesn’t do that? When life is hard, it’s your family and faith in God that keep you going.”

As Leslie recovered, he had to relearn to eat, to breathe, to speak. He could not move his body below



his neck, so he learned to operate a motorized wheelchair by blowing into a tube. He took each day, each challenge at a time.

He resolved to return to school at BYU. That meant learning to use his computer again — without his hands.

“I had two methods of interacting with the computer,” he wrote in his application essay for law school. “First, I dictated commands using voice recognition software, which quickly turned into yelling commands and then giving the computer the silent treatment and hoping it could guess what I wanted. Second, I used an 18-inch stick clasped in my mouth to punch out my instructions key-by-key. After seven months, I was proficient with both methods — but I preferred the stick.”

One year after his accident, he returned to BYU. At first his sister took notes for him in classes. But

LEFT: RYAN SPIERS AND DANIEL LESLIE STRUCK UP A FRIENDSHIP ON THEIR FIRST DAY AT DUKE LAW IN MAY 2008.

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— Kristen Wolff '11



KRISTEN WOLFF '11 PRESENTED DANIEL LESLIE WITH THE JUSTIN MILLER AWARD FOR CITIZENSHIP AT THE GRADUATION GALA ON MAY 12.

he gradually found ways to live and work more independently. As he adapted and excelled, his goals expanded.

He volunteered with the local low-income taxpayer program, assisting individuals, families, and small business owners in completing their taxes. He was one of the top three filers of his group, managed a team of 10 volunteers, and received a scholarship in recognition for his service.

Leslie completed his bachelor’s degree in accounting and was accepted into BYU’s graduate program, also in accounting. His interest in international travel and business — sparked by his two-year Mormon mission to Russia prior to his accident — was reinvigorated by his study of international markets, securities, and finance.

He focused on his next goal: law school.



LESLIE PICKED DUKE because of its reputation, because he received financial aid, and because he wanted to study with Professor James Cox, whose expertise in business law and securities regulation fit perfectly with Leslie’s interests.

Leslie also was intrigued by Duke’s unique JD/LLM program, which allows students to complete a juris doctor and a master’s in international and comparative law in three years by starting school in the summer and completing additional coursework. Leslie arrived in May 2008 to begin his law school career, along with about 45 other 1Ls pursuing dual degrees.

“Being a summer starter gave me a huge advantage,” he says. “I think I would have gotten a little lost if I started in the fall with the rest of the class. I met a University of Utah graduate, Ryan Spiers, on

my very first day, and he became one of my best friends. The summer starters become close friends, and that helped me.”

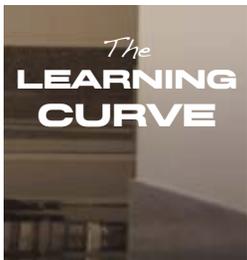
And Leslie needed help. In Utah, he had lived in his own apartment with care from home health aides. He assumed he would do the same in North Carolina, but he had difficulty finding the necessary assistance. When it became apparent that he could not live on his own as he had in Utah, his mother, Lauri, decided to stay in Durham, leaving her husband behind in Colorado.

“My mom deserves so much credit. None of this would have been possible without her help,” Leslie says of his mom, who missed milestones in her three daughters’ lives, including the birth of a grandchild, while caring for her son. “I wouldn’t have even tried without her.”

His mother, for her part, didn’t think twice about her decision to stay in Durham. “Daniel earned the right to come to law school — he *earned* it,” she says. “We felt like he deserved the opportunity for success. I quit working after he broke his neck; we knew his needs would be so great, and my husband and I decided that I would be the one to be there for him. In some ways, it’s been harder for my husband. I get to see what’s going on; I get to be part of what Daniel is doing.”

Leslie also had to rely on his classmates for help with moment-to-moment needs at school — eating, setting up his laptop, and arranging his backpack on his motorized wheelchair. Administrators learned to anticipate his needs, ordering books in alternative formats and investigating options for voice-recognition software. Members of his church helped him and his mother settle into their apartments and Durham.

“Dan was the first person I met in law school,” says classmate Spiers, who frequently drove Leslie to school. “It was sort of a novelty to see someone typing with a stick in his mouth. But it didn’t take long before I stopped noticing the chair altogether.”



LESLIE READILY ADMITS that law school challenged him in ways he didn't anticipate — and not just physically. The first year was a “huge learning curve,” he says. “My grades were terrible.”

He had no idea how to outline a case. He “never liked writing” and, as an accounting student, rarely had to write. After his

first-year writing professor, Diane Dimond, told him it was critical to success in the law — and that he barely would pass his first semester of legal writing — he made a point of taking a writing class each semester for the rest of his time at Duke.

“I still struggle with writing. I still dislike it,” Leslie says. “But I am a lot better at it, and I know I can do it.”

He received his lowest grade ever, a 2.7, in Professor Doriane Coleman's notoriously tough Torts class.

Leslie was stunned by the grade. He had enjoyed the class and felt certain he knew the material. So he met with Coleman to seek feedback on his exam. She reread it with him and told him the problem was not so much that his answers were wrong, but that they were inadequate. He hadn't discussed the relevant cases or cited applicable rules. “What are your notes like?” Coleman asked.

Leslie can't take notes.

“When I told her I didn't take notes, she said, ‘That's ridiculous. You have to have notes.’ And she was right. I had been paying attention in class, reading the cases. I could tell you who did what, that this person crashed his buggy into this person. I remembered the facts, but not the law. And the law is what I needed to know. I needed notes.”

Leslie changed his approach. He asked someone in each class to take notes for him. He listened differently. His grades improved. And he started to have fun.

Even as he surmounted challenge after challenge in the classroom, he learned to take advantage of the many benefits of attending Duke University. Chief among them: basketball games. “I was not a basketball fan when I came to Duke, but it's impossible to be here and not become one,” says Leslie, who came up a winner in the graduate-student basketball ticket lottery in each of his three years at Duke.

“When they built Cameron [Indoor Stadium], they obviously didn't think much about people in wheelchairs coming to games. This was a *great thing*. There was no place for me to sit except on the floor, court-side. I've been to the Dean Dome [at UNC] two times, and it's terrible! I had to sit halfway up the stadium. I couldn't see anything. In Cameron, one of the players once fell into me diving for a ball. It was great!”

Leslie also got involved in a variety of Law School programs. He served as vice president of the J. Reuben Clark Society (the Mormon law student organization), prepared tax returns with the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, and, through the Business Law Society, helped organize ESQ, the Law School's annual business law symposium.

“One of my favorite memories from my 1L year is going to the Duke Lemur Center with Dan and some other friends,” says class-

“You just can't help but be impressed by him. He's not just talented; he's gifted. He's knowledgeable and resourceful. It somehow happens that you don't think of him as disabled. He's just a guy who comes around in a chair.”

— Professor James Cox

mate and fellow summer starter Elizabeth Hall '11. “I ordinarily would not have taken time away from studying to do this, but Dan helped organize the trip and convinced me to go. It turned out to be a really good day and was definitely worth the study break. Dan really likes to try new things, and his enthusiasm is contagious.”



NEGOTIATING A TRIP in a wheelchair to Duke's Lemur Center is one thing; a trip abroad is quite another. The prospect of studying at one of Duke's summer institutes in either Hong Kong or Geneva — a requirement for all students in Duke's JD/LLM program — was highly unsettling for Leslie.

“I was really afraid of the idea of going from one location to another,” he says. “I had only been on one plane since my accident, for a short flight from Salt Lake to Los Angeles. An international trip was a whole different thing — I didn't know how I would handle my health care. I didn't know if public transportation would be accessible.”

He decided to go to Geneva. He researched transportation options and connected online with people in wheelchairs who lived there. Law School administrators gathered information about wheelchair access in classrooms and housing. He also found catastrophic insurance that would cover anything unrelated to his “pre-existing condition.” His mother agreed to go as well. “I couldn't have done it without her,” Leslie says.

And when he got to Geneva, he asked for help — and he found it.

“The international students were angels,” says Spiers, who also attended the Geneva institute. “They carried him into the buses, carried him to the top deck of the cruise boat. Because he had to take his manual chair instead of his powered chair, all the students pitched in to help him. Every 30 or 40 minutes in class, we knew we needed to lean his chair back to shift his weight. Someone would just jump up and do it.”

Leslie excelled in his courses in Geneva, too, which was a welcome boost after a trying first year. “It gave me the confidence that I could perform at a very high level despite not being able to get around as

“So many people have invested in me — whether they gave me a ride to school, gave me their notes, or just opened a door for me.”

— Daniel Leslie '11



easily,” he says. “I realized I really could do anything — I just might need to ask for help.”

During his second year, Leslie hit his academic stride. He took several business law and finance courses and relished his immersion in a subject that excited him.

“Dan is a remarkable student,” says Professor Cox, for whom Leslie served as research assistant on a project examining shareholder lawsuits filed under the Private Securities Litigation Reform Act. “The acuity with which he can penetrate dense material is amazing. He brought real maturity and insightfulness to our classes, and he received the highest grade — by a wide margin — in Corporate Finance. When he worked for me, he created a program to extract data, organize it, and format it in a way that saved us a tremendous amount of time and effort. He did this completely on his own initiative. His work was tremendous. He worked mostly [at a distance] with one of the economists working with me on the study, and she had no idea of his disability.”

For his 2L summer, Leslie secured an internship at the Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington, D.C. He worked in the Division of Corporate Finance, reviewing corporate disclosure statements to ensure accuracy and compliance with disclosure and accounting requirements for publicly traded companies. He loved the work, and he made an impression on his colleagues.

“He received rave reviews from his colleagues at the SEC,” Cox says. “You just can’t help but be impressed by him. He’s not just talented; he’s gifted. He’s knowledgeable and resourceful. It somehow

happens that you don’t think of him as disabled. He’s just a guy who comes around in a chair. Everything else about him is not just normal — it’s extraordinary.”



MANY WHO CAME TO KNOW Leslie during his time at Duke Law say his lack of self-consciousness is among his most striking traits. His openness and ability to put people at ease are indications of his courage and determination to engage fully in his life, says Professor Coleman.

“I think he just decided very early on that he would embrace his life fully, and that to do that he has to allow himself to be dependent on others who could take care of him in the ways he can’t take care of himself,” Coleman says.

“For Daniel, everything from getting to school to getting to class to getting his lunch to going to the bathroom to putting on a jacket or taking off a jacket — everything takes a team,” she adds. “He embraces his team, and we embrace being his team. It happens seamlessly because he has decided to live his life, to become a lawyer, to engage. It is remarkable to watch. I’ve just been a teacher. Many others have been bigger parts of that team. Both he and the team have been extraordinary.”

Leslie, who plans a career in international business law and securities after he takes the California bar exam this summer, believes he has thrived at Duke in part because the community is small and collaborative.

“I wanted a place where I could get to know everybody by name,” he says. “When people don’t know me, I’m just a guy in a wheelchair. But when people get to know me, they see past my disability.

“And I always have to ask for help, so there was a practical reason for choosing a law school with a smaller student body,” he adds. “It’s easier to say, ‘Hey, Paul, could you get that door for me?’ than ‘Hey, you!’”

In much the same way that he pushed himself through recovery after his accident — step by step, challenge by challenge — Leslie pushed himself to succeed at Duke Law. He says he has done so both for himself and for “his team.”

“My whole family is supporting me,” he says. “I have the confidence of the people at this great Law School who brought me here, the alumni who made donations that supported my scholarship. So many people have invested in me — whether they gave me a ride to school, gave me their notes, or just opened a door for me.

“It’s like when you watch a movie: You want to see the hero beat the bad guy, or find the treasure, or get to the top of the mountain. I think that’s why we help each other. We like to see people overcome challenges and accomplish great things. People are rooting for me. And I don’t want to let them down.” ♡

“My mom deserves so much credit. None of this would have been possible without her help.”

— Daniel Leslie '11



LAURI LESLIE (ABOVE, CENTER) REMAINED WITH DANIEL IN DURHAM WHILE HE ATTENDED DUKE LAW. THEY TOURED DUKE GARDENS DURING THE DUAL-DEGREE STUDENTS' ORIENTATION IN MAY 2008, ALONG WITH ASSISTANT DEAN JENNIFER MAHER '83 (THIRD FROM LEFT) AND CLASSMATES.

“WHAT
CHOICE
do we
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LAURI LESLIE didn't hesitate to put her life on hold to help her son go to law school. “Why become a parent if you're going to quit when the job gets hard?” she says. “My job wasn't finished.”

She has been a regular presence in the hallways at Duke, working on and off in temporary positions for various departments and getting to know her son's classmates. She even became something of a surrogate grandmother to the young daughter of Ryan Spiers '11 and his wife, who lived nearby.

“One thing most parents don't get to know is how amazing the young people who attend this school are,” she says. “They are the most kind, most generous, brightest people you could ever hope to meet. I hear people make

lawyer jokes and I think, ‘You just haven't met the students at Duke Law School.’ I have been so impressed.”

Daniel, of course, has made an impression on his classmates. Many have noted that seeing him push past so many obstacles in order to succeed academically has helped to reshape their own attitudes about life and success.

“It's sort of a joke among people with spinal cord injuries — everyone always says, ‘You are such an inspiration,’ and the comments almost seem trite,” Lauri says. “This is just our life — what choice do we have? But I do think that when you encounter someone who is different from you or has overcome challenges — if you take time to get to know them, you get to know more about yourself, too. You develop a new understanding of what truly is important.” ♡