

Peer Support Benefits Everyone

The following stories provide a glimpse of the lives of several families and individuals whose lives have been directly or indirectly touched and forever changed by limb loss. Although these people are scattered across the country, they have all learned the same fundamental value:

No matter whether an individual is a member, supporter or a leader of a support group, everyone benefits from the interaction and fellowship of participating in support groups.

Paying It Forward

How one Texas family keeps giving their gift of hope

by Erin M. King

On June 18, 2006 – three weeks after high school graduation – 18-year-old Mark Stargel was enjoying the Texas sun as he lent a helping hand at a Lubbock-area boat race. Little did Mark and his parents, Bobby and Nancy Stargel, know that his decision to help out would be one that significantly impacted their futures as well as those of others.

During the race, Mark was struck by one of the boats, severely injuring his left leg. As a result, he needed an above-knee amputation. During a three-week stay in the hospital, he began to speak of his future college plans with less confidence – as if they were now something of the past. Fortunately, Mark and his parents got a rather unexpected visitor who brought them a new sense of hope for the many things Mark had in store for his future. That visitor was Matthew Brown.

“Matthew walked into my room, and I saw he had the same amputation as me,” says Mark. “At that moment, I wanted to jump from my hospital bed and be in the same place as he was in recovery. He told me not to



Matthew Brown and Mark
Courtesy of Bobby & Nancy Stargel

talk in the past tense, that I could do whatever I wanted. Matthew really provided inspiration for me at the moment I needed it most.”

Reaching One More

After he got out of the hospital, Mark learned of a 10-year-old girl who had lost her arm in a boating accident. He visited her when she was home from the hospital.

“I wanted to do the same thing for her that Matthew had done for me,” he says. “I want other people to see that life is not over because of an amputation and that you can do whatever you want, and probably more. When I was in the hospital, I kept saying that I was going to go to the University of North Texas, but not now. Matthew kept telling me I was still able. Because of him, I’ll begin studying television, radio and film there this fall.”

Encouraging Mark to go on with his college plans wasn’t the only thing Matthew inspired the Stargels to do – they also wanted to start an amputee support group in their community so that others can have the same encouragement and education they received from Matthew.



Mark bowling

Courtesy of Bobby & Nancy Stargel

“We knew other people needed support,” says Bobby. “I saw the hope that Mark as well as his mother and I received when Matthew came to visit. That’s why the three of us got with Matthew to start an amputee support group here in Lubbock.”

Support for All

The Stargels contacted the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) and were put in touch with Susan Tipton, who provided them with helpful information about support groups. She also told them about the then-upcoming ACA conference in Atlanta, Georgia, which was held in June 2007, so the family could make plans to attend.

After reading the information they received, Bobby, Nancy and Mark began reaching out to the community and spreading the word about the first meeting of their support group.

“We started meeting other people who were amputees, calling places like the hospital and physicians’ offices and placing ads in our local newspaper to let people know about the group,” Bobby says. “I also made simple business cards that we could hand out to people who we met and thought might benefit from the support group.”

On the second Tuesday of December 2006, the Lubbock Area Amputee Support Group held its first meeting at South Plains Rehabilitation

“Attending the ACA conference this summer showed us that there are people of all ages and types who are living productive lives with amputations. We met a few people who are Mark’s age, which was really good for us because we haven’t met very many people his age with amputations here in Lubbock.”

– Nancy Stargel, who began the Lubbock Area Amputee Support Group with her husband, Bobby, and son, Mark

Center. Since then, the group has grown from its original 15 attendees to nearly 50.

“We’re still learning,” says Nancy, “but we learned that all you have to do is get together. If I could give advice to people who are thinking about starting a support group in their communities, I would say, ‘Just start simple, even if it’s just going to get a cup of coffee with a few people.’ The important first step is to just start and share. Also, contact other amputee support groups and the ACA. These are great resources to help answer your questions and guide you along the way.”

Keeping Things Going

Others thinking about starting a community

support group can learn a few more things from the Stargels. One important thing that the family and those who help them promote the support group do is to continually talk to their attendees and potential participants about what they want and what would be beneficial. From this feedback, the Stargels began having guest speakers at their monthly meetings to discuss subjects such as prosthetics and wound care and to share their personal stories about living with amputation.

“We want to meet the needs of every person, and we’re trying to have more activities that everyone in attendance can do,” Bobby says. “We also try to have the monthly meeting at different times of the day so we can reach more people. Once we held the meeting at our area nursing home so people there could be a part.”

In addition, the support group has hosted events like a Super Bowl party, wheelchair basketball, bowling and golf so its members can enjoy each others’ friendship and a good time.

“The goal is to encourage, offer hope and provide resources to those with amputations and their families,” says Bobby. “We’re thankful for all of the help we’ve received from people in our community and the ACA. It takes everyone playing a part to make the support group a reality and a success.” ■