



BRENDAN LONEY '13

A Story of

PERSEVERANCE





Many of today's college students face significant obstacles while attempting to earn their undergraduate degree, including financial, family, and personal obstacles. Brendan Loney is just one of 550 Gustavus students who received their degrees on June 2, 2013, but Loney's journey to the commencement ceremony is a unique one that required a different level of strength and perseverance.

Loney came to Gustavus as part of the class of 2011 and a member of the men's hockey team, but in the summer after his sophomore year, while staying at a friend's cabin, Loney broke two vertebrae (C4 and C5) in his spinal cord as the result of a diving accident. The accident left Loney paralyzed from his chest down and changed his life and his journey at Gustavus forever. After a lengthy stay at a long-term acute care and rehabilitation hospital in Colorado, and several more months of therapy and rehabilitation at the Courage Center in Golden Valley, Loney was able to return home and start considering his future plans.

"Right after the injury I honestly didn't know if I would be able to come back to Gustavus," Loney said. "I knew I wanted to finish school, but I wasn't really sure how it would happen. Before I even started talking about different possibilities, Professor Bruce Johnson, my adviser, said, 'Hold on, let's see if we can talk to some people to get this to work,' and that's kind of how it started."

A MEMORABLE RETURN

Before there was any talk of Loney resuming his academic studies at Gustavus, he made his first trip back to campus on February 12, 2010—seven months after his accident. Hundreds of students packed Lund Arena as Loney, accompanied by several of his best friends from Gustavus, were introduced on Don Roberts Ice Rink before the start of a varsity men's hockey game against Hamline University.

"It was wild and pretty crazy to see the support that was there and I just wanted to take it all in. There were a lot of people there and they were all chanting my name—it was really nice," Loney said. "I just remember thinking how great it was to be back with my friends. It seemed like I hadn't missed a beat."

The support for Loney didn't just come from his fellow students, but from faculty and administrators alike who started making arrangements so that Loney could return as a part-time student and eventually earn his degree.

Loney, a management major, started by taking one class a semester and making one trip a week down to St. Peter. Pretty soon he was taking two classes a semester and making the trip to campus two days a week. With his time on campus limited, Loney kept pace with his classmates by occasionally calling his professors and doing extra work at home. Several

professors also recorded lectures so Loney could listen to them from his home when time allowed. A number of Gustavus faculty members, particularly within the Economics and Management Department, worked with Loney to make the commencement weekend a possibility for him.

"All of the professors that I had class with made arrangements for me, and all of my professors were so nice," Loney said. "Especially Bruce Johnson—he took on the role of helping me by talking to all of my professors before I enrolled in their classes. I had Kristian Braekkan for two classes and I spent a lot of time with him. Kathi Tunheim welcomed me to her class right away. Those three professors really helped me out in a lot of ways."

Johnson, who was Loney's First Term Seminar instructor during the 2007 fall semester, agrees that faculty members have been more than willing to make accommodations to help Loney achieve his goal of graduating from Gustavus.

"Several faculty members stepped up to make this work, because we encountered some bumps along the way, such as figuring out how Brendan could fulfill certain requirements like a writing course and a science course with a laboratory component," Johnson said. "He clearly had some ups and downs and some frustrations along the way, but he listened and had a really positive attitude. When he got into a class, I think he was excited about being there and he participated fully."

A PHENOMENAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

While Gustavus faculty and staff were important figures in Loney's life after his injury, he has a large support system of family and friends who not only assist him with basic everyday tasks, but who also fuel his desire to live life to the fullest every day.

"I have the best family that there is. They have been supporting



"It was wild and pretty crazy to see the support that was there."

me and pushing me to achieve what I want to do,” Loney said. “They sincerely will ask what I really want to do and when I tell them my honest answer they make sure it happens. I wouldn’t be here without them.”

Loney’s parents, Julie and Duffy, have been there for him since day one, while he also spends a significant amount of time with his sister, Molly, and his three nephews who live just a few miles away. Loney also keeps in touch with a number of Gustavus alumni from the class of 2011, including Kevin Hoffman, Josh Elledge, and Brandon Boyd just to name a few.

“I am still very close with a lot of my 2011 classmates,” Loney said. “I talk to them every week—we text, call each other, get together and watch hockey and so it’s really nice having those close relationships.”

Two other figures who have been front and center for Loney over the years are his personal care attendant, Nicole Kohlbeck, and his service dog, Rio. Kohlbeck is always by Loney’s side and drove him from his home in Maple Grove to St. Peter countless times during his time at Gustavus. Rio is another constant in Loney’s life and will be right next to him when he crosses the stage at Sunday’s commencement ceremony.

The Courage Center has also provided Loney with a tremendous amount of support as well as cutting-edge physical and occupational therapies. Perhaps the most beneficial service that the center provides is called ABLE therapy, which stands for Activity-Based Locomotor Exercise. After strapping Loney into

a harness, therapists guide Loney’s legs on a treadmill for 30-45 minutes. The exercise is all about keeping muscles strong and internal organs healthy.

“It’s really good for my body and it also just feels good to be upright walking and to feel tall again,” Loney said. “The sensation is coming back a little more in certain areas. Under my left thigh I can feel a lot and in my calves and my feet. I can usually tell when people are touching me. I’m working out every day, trying to stretch, and trying to get my core stronger. They are small steps, but it’s good.”

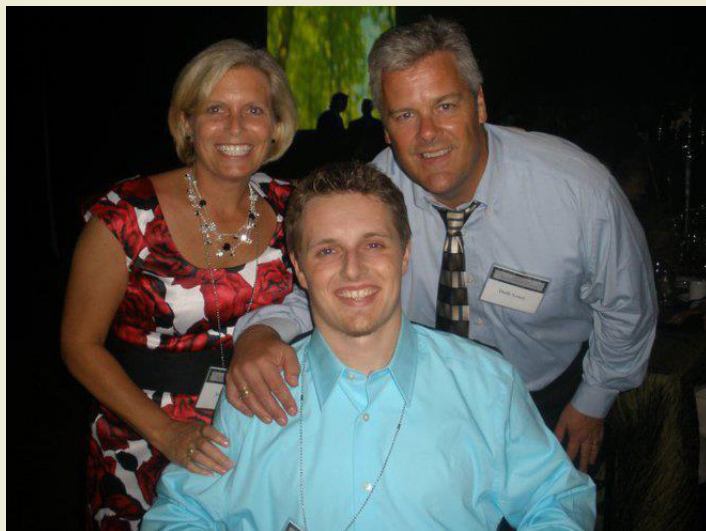
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LIVE LIFE

A self-described people person, Loney always pictured himself doing something in sales or marketing where he could interact with people. He said he chose to major in management because it would allow him to go down many different avenues with his career.

Several years ago, Loney and Hoffman started their own inspirational clothing line called Live Life Clothing. Hoffman has since moved out to California to pursue his career, but Loney stuck with the concept and continued to develop a business plan during his time at Gustavus. Loney hopes to someday combine the clothing line with a motivational speaking career.

“I’ve always had kind of an entrepreneur mindset and when Kevin went out to California I told Bruce about the idea and he used what I was doing outside of school to correlate with what we were doing in class, which was really fun,” Loney said. “Our



Top Left: Loney with his family before the accident

Bottom Left: Live Life logo

Right: Loney wearing Live Life apparel

company is designed to inspire people on a daily basis as they face life's obstacles. Live Life Clothing represents a lifestyle of those who never give up in the face of adversity—giving it their all every single day.”

“Brendan has been very aggressive making contacts up in the

“We think if I went to any other school that it wouldn't have turned out this way.”

Twin Cities for Live Life Clothing,” Johnson said that spring. “Kristian Braekkan and I plan to work with him in the summer to develop a stronger business plan to help that business grow because I think it could be very successful for him.”

Success is something that Loney's best friends say they have come to expect out of him.

“Brendan's positive attitude and ability to find the good in the situation, even when it appears there is none, is his biggest

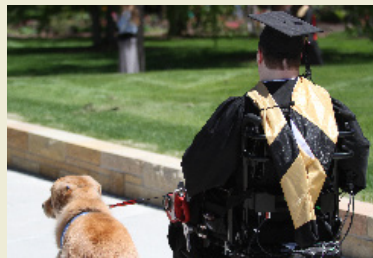
strength,” Elledge said. “Brendan has used this traumatic accident to propel himself to the next level—a level that most people cannot fathom. He suffers this horrific injury and continues to go to school, get his degree, and start a clothing company. He has already made a huge difference in this world and this is just the start of it.”

While Loney is clearly motivated to make a difference in the world in the years to come, commencement was a day of reflection and celebration of a six-year journey. A journey that nobody could have predicted, but a journey that Loney can be proud of.

“My parents and I talk all the time and we think if I went to any other school that it wouldn't have turned out this way. That's why when I talk to people who are thinking about going to Gustavus, I tell them 100 percent to go there,” Loney said. “I felt excitement that day. It was a little bittersweet because I didn't graduate with my best friends, but it was really nice wearing that cap and gown and finally getting through.”

Matt Thomas is the director of media relations and internal communication at Gustavus Adolphus College. After graduating from Gustavus in 2000 with degrees in communication studies and history, Thomas worked as a sports journalist in the western suburbs of Minneapolis before returning to Gustavus in 2007.

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Loney's service dog, Rio, is a constant in his life and was right next to him for commencement.