

## Chapter Two

by

### Gene R. Rodgers

Though I live in Austin, TX now, I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. I broke my neck at age 17 when I fell from a cliff at Whipp's Ledges in Ohio. The good news is, **since** then, I have had many adventures in 40 countries. Some of the many activities I've enjoyed include sailing, sky diving, scuba diving, parasailing, and I even made an expedition to Mt. Everest Base Camp. You can see pictures from some of my adventures at [www.GenosPlace.org](http://www.GenosPlace.org) I'll show some of those events here while I tell you how I did it.

When I had my accident, there was no alcohol or drugs involved. I want to make that clear. I was in the park with high school friends. My only memory is walking towards the cliffs. The next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital 2 weeks later. I broke my neck at the C-5 level causing instant paralysis from the shoulders down. There was no law suit or insurance settlement. Thankfully my father was a good provider and had great insurance. Still, my parents were saddled with tremendous medical bills and there was no money for anything more than necessities.

I wish I could say my 11 month stay in an old, isolated, former TB hospital, they called a rehab center, helped, but the fact is, the only thing I learned there was that I would have to take charge of my life. Like Kevin Costner said, "When a defining moment comes along, you've got to define the moment, or the moment defines you."

I credit my parents and many friends to my successful rehabilitation. My parents were hard working and taught me the habits of industry at an early age. They told me I could have anything I wanted, as long as I got a job to pay for it. That still applied after I broke my neck. They set an example by working hard and never complaining. If something needed to be done, they did it rather than make excuses why they couldn't. That was a valuable life lesson for me, my older brother and my younger five siblings.

I finished high school while in the rehab center. Once discharged, I tried to acclimate to home. As a handicapped person, in order to survive, I knew I needed an edge, some kind of advantage. I had already learned good work habits, tenacity and perseverance from my parents, but I needed more. I needed, at least, a college education. Less than 3 months later, I moved to Kent State University, in Ohio, where I earned my first college degree and made friends that changed my life. That's where my destiny was further shaped, where I developed the love for traveling and realized there really could be a *Chapter Two* in my life. It's been 35+ years and I still stay in contact with those friends who became family. They accepted me as I was,

with all the imperfections and frailness I still have today. They included me in all aspects of life, for which I am eternally grateful.

Shortly after my accident, my high school friends produced a musical benefit for me. A year later I used that money to buy a van. With the help of friends, I drove from Canada to Panama. After traveling in the States for a few years, I set travel goals. First, to see all 50 states, then every country in North America, then in Central America. That was all do-able by driving. I also set goals to travel to every continent. With the exception of going to Hawaii, I accomplished all travel goals.

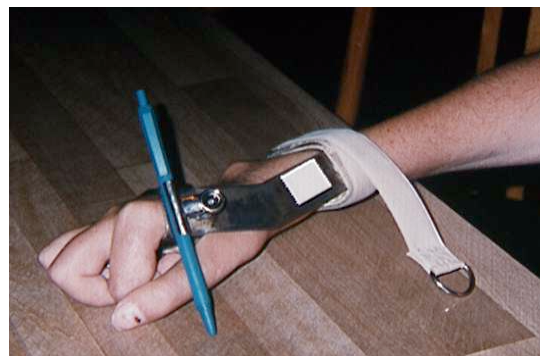
After college I moved to New Mexico to get away from the snow and find a job. I was invited to join the NM Jaycees – a leadership training organization. They taught me about goal setting and giving back to the community. After working a few years at an ILC in Santa Fe, I moved to Albuquerque to get my MBA. Because of my disability, I was allowed extra time to take tests but I knew if I wanted to be successful, I would have to compete with my able-body peers. To that end, I took all tests and completed all projects in the same time as fellow students.



I created a portable notebook-desk. I started with a standard notepad, then Velcro-ed my HP-12C calculator and mini-computer, that I programmed in Basic. I also attached to it my calculator instructions. I pushed buttons with

a mouth-stick and wrote with a unique writing brace I made with the help of a clever occupational therapist. I never would have got a good job or my MBA without it. It had just 1 velcro strap and I was able to put it on and take it off independently.

While working in New Mexico for several years I made friends with folks in ADAPT, a disability rights organization. They too played a major role in my growth. With their influence, I ended up in Austin, Texas where I live and work today. They taught me the power, and more importantly, the process of protesting, to



secure our civil rights such as accessible mass transportation.

I earned a Switzer Fellowship to research Community-Based Rehabilitation, from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR). I continue to receive emails, regarding my work posted at [www.CBRresources.org](http://www.CBRresources.org), from people all over the world. That year I was the only non PhD to earn a Switzer Research Fellowship. I worked 8-10 hours everyday. After a year of this Fellowship, my body could no longer keep up with demands I placed on it. I knew I couldn't return to full-time employment. I include this story though to illustrate life is a culmination of successes and failures. As I learned from my father, I constantly had several "irons in the fire" at any given moment because, as Vince Lombardi would say, "Success is never forever, and failure is rarely final". I failed in my 1<sup>st</sup> attempt to get this fellowship but perseverance prevailed on my next attempt.

I became an entrepreneur, and, after a time, a self-made millionaire. When I recognized the economy, as reflected in the stock market, was changing, I jumped at the opportunity to take advantage of it. I bought and sold securities, leveraging my investments to the hilt. I parlayed my meager earnings into a tidy sum while using some of it to travel. Getting my MBA, I learned how to make a million dollars, I just didn't learn how to keep it. That was a unique time in our history that I doubt we'll ever see again. It was a very traumatic experience losing all that and my fully accessible dream house I was having built. Suffice it to say, success favors the prepared mind. Experience, education and a lot of hard work had helped me build a business. I just wasn't good at keeping the fruits of my labor.

I rebuilt my life – again. While designing a business card, I had an epiphany. I've had various job titles but I wanted a title that would never change. After all, I'm still the same person. I realized the only constant in my *Chapter Two* is that I'm an **Argonaut**. I enjoy traveling, adventure and exploring as evidenced on my web page [www.GenosPlace.org](http://www.GenosPlace.org) There, you will find many pictures and a few videos of some of my adventures. I shared them on DVD and produced a show on public access TV called *Geno's Place*.

In order to make my experiences more relevant, I created a new TV show called The Gene And Dave Show. Now, along with my co-host, Dave Dauber, create shows that are broadcast on Channel Austin. Our shows are captioned and archived at [www.TheGeneAndDaveShow.com](http://www.TheGeneAndDaveShow.com) Looking back on my life, I have concluded that my station in life is due to my upbringing, friends and family, hard work, and both good and bad luck. I've learned "Life is the sum of all your choices." "People believe they make choices, but it may be more accurate to say that their choices make them." In the words of J. K. Rowling, "It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

I never landed on the moon or was pictured on the cover of Adventure Life, but I'm happy with what I've done.

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