

PROGRESS MEASURED IN INCHES

In the midst of a worldwide pandemic, a nurse from Iowa had to leave her home and family to begin recovery from a spinal cord injury

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Debbie Wahlert waits in a manual wheelchair, leaning forward to run her palms down the length of her right leg. The space in which she sits, filled with robotic augmentations and chest harnesses hanging from an overhead track, serves less as a therapy clinic and more as a future-tech laboratory.

It is the physical rehabilitation center at Quality Living, Inc. (QLI), a facility in Omaha, Nebraska, specializing in the often months-long treatment required by those who have suffered brain or spinal cord injuries. And, more than two hours removed from the rest of Wahlert's rural-Iowa life, it has effectively been her home for the last nine weeks.

The trappings have grown familiar. The whine of Functional Electrical Stimulation bikes lining the wall. The antiseptic smell of chlorine from an adjacent water therapy pool. Bionic exoskeletons whirring to life, wearable servos and lithium battery-powered motors capable of lifting patients into upright gait. This technology serves individuals much like Wahlert—men and women who have lost tremendous physical ability as the result of some catastrophe. Car crashes, gunshot wounds. In Wahlert's case, complications following an otherwise routine surgical procedure.

Wahlert waits pleasantly amidst the activity, keeping an effortless, compassionate demeanor. She greets clinicians filtering in and out, shares gentle reaffirmation in response to other patients' minor milestones. Their personal bests, their furthest walks.

But underneath her compassion lies focus. With each passing beat one can almost read the checklist Wahlert works through in her head. The summits yet to climb. Loose ends yet to tie.

Debbie Wahlert works to improve her standing balance with Ed Armstrong, QLI's Coordinator of Adaptive Sports.

A physical therapist approaches, carrying an aluminum walker and something else—a padded cuff soon to be velcroed tight just beneath Wahlert's right knee. On the face of it sits a single rectangular battery pack. Soon, it will send electrical impulses into the muscles of her impaired right leg.

"I'm still dealing with footdrop," Wahlert explains, describing a continued inability to clear her right foot off level ground while stepping.

Half-directed at the therapist, the statement is uttered out loud as a declaration of intent. And as Wahlert plants her weight on her feet and strains to rise from her wheelchair to a standing position over the walker handles, it is clear today's physical therapy session has that specific impairment in its sights.

Months ago, even a single step was a defied expectation. Standing, itself, its own kind of miracle. A spinal cord injury like Wahlert's makes everyday action—putting on shoes, riding in the seat of a car, cooking breakfast at the stove—feel out of reach. Normality, in whatever definition such a word might assume, becomes a vague, intangible prospect.

Today, on this sun-bleached late-June afternoon, Wahlert walks to put normality back in focus.

When the 55-year-old native of Mitchellville, Iowa, catalogs the events that changed her life, it's a careful exercise. She first cites a history of back issues, kick-started in earnest some 15 years ago by an injury suffered while lifting a heavy object out of the family SUV. That incident was the first in a chain, the cause of recurring strains and persistent, worsening chronic pain.



Exercise Assistant Sam Warneke looks on as Debbie performs sit-to-stand exercises in QLI's gait and robotics lab.



Debbie works out independently in the QLI fitness center. Her injury impaired much of the strength and mobility throughout her body.

In 2019, MRI scans revealed severe spinal stenosis and a calcified, herniated disc in Wahlert's mid-back. Left unchecked, these degenerative conditions would put her at risk for future damage and continued discomfort. Conservative options were deemed unviable, prompting a laminectomy, a procedure intended to remove the problematic disc in question and decompress the delicate nerve underneath.

This operation was supposed to provide answers. And yet, rather than awaken revitalized, Wahlert faced terrifying uncertainty.

"In the recovery room the nurses told me to wiggle my toes," Wahlert recounts. "I couldn't. I had this intense tingling sensation, like how

you get when your hand or foot falls asleep. That feeling never went away, and I couldn't move my toes."

A blood clot had formed at the site of the surgery. Its influence proved catastrophic—cutting off all feeling and nearly all function beneath Wahlert's rib cage.

"I had zero control over my trunk. No control over my legs," she says. "Every time I was placed upright I felt like I was falling forward. My muscles didn't do any work."

Her description of the event comes without fluff or sentimentality. And, most of all, without blame—none toward the surgery, nor the surgeon, nor the circumstances of the world foisting this hardship upon her.

Part of this, perhaps, is a function of expertise. For nearly 35 years, Wahlert has enjoyed employment as a nurse within Younker Rehabilitation, a Des Moines-based service of the UnityPoint Health network. It's there that she has tended to patients recovering from injuries not altogether unlike her own. From building relationships with injury survivors and their families to collaborating in targeted clinical strategies, she's had to bear witness to stories like the one she lives through now.

She knows the footprint of trauma. Has seen the change an accident can impose. Understands the fundamental nature of human fragility.

And with unique perspective comes unique advantage. As days in a hospital

room tallied up, Wahlert forwent the self-pity and emotional distress, instead engineering a battle plan to target the nuances of her injury.

"The clock was always ticking for me," Wahlert admits thinking. "It was crucial to start putting my body through the sequence of regular movement as soon as possible."

Her mindset generated undeniable propulsive force. Even when rehabilitation led her to inpatient services outside the state—200 miles away to Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital in Lincoln, Nebraska—she powered through the bleak, unknown, early phases of therapy, where victory came with little fanfare. A voluntary millimeter twitch of the big toe.

The response of a limb drifting on command.

Wahlert plied both poise and expertise, assuming the role of co-therapist to compare notes with her clinicians, communicate goals, and develop the increasing challenge to set the stage for persistent physical growth. Every inch, every movement, signalled the milestones adding up.

After paralysis, "normal" is a cruel word. It stops referring to the world as it operates in a state of rest, but rather the threshold against which a person measures loss. "Normal" magnifies the gap between what is and what used to be. In February, Wahlert's life no longer resembled her definition of "normal."

By March, the rest of the world had followed suit.

As the mysterious respiratory coronavirus, covid-19, swept across the country, medical centers rushed to protect patients from exposure. Hospitals, including the facility housing Wahlert, implemented universal visitor lockouts. The response created a vacuum in her life, barricading her from any in-person contact with the closest members of her family—her husband, Brad, and their children and grandchildren. "That was the first time I really felt homesick," Wahlert says. "I was used to having people there. People make the process easier. And then all that was cut off."



Physical therapist Katie Schlieker assists Debbie as she works on navigating stairs.



Debbie is reunited with her husband, Brad. Debbie was not able to see her family in person for over two months.



After her discharge from QLI on June 19, Deb returned to a surprise welcome-home party.

Surrounded by masked therapists and hand sanitizer dispensers in every room, Wahlert filled that vacuum with sheer willpower and hard work. By May, at that point beginning to take reciprocal steps on her own, she became a veritable conductor, guiding therapists toward waypoints and goals under her purview. Fittingly, her rehabilitation never stopped. She often trained more than eight hours a day within an array of specialized treatments: robotics-assisted walking, bicycling with custom-tailored adaptations, electric muscle stimulation, even unorthodox disciplines—dry needling and deep tissue massage.

Progress didn't come easily. And foster greater function, therapy pushed her past the limits of comfort.

She'd learned how to safely enter and exit a car, for instance. Soon thereafter she was behind the wheel, operating a car modified to meet her ability level. Elsewhere, she had learned to clamber from floor to wheelchair, a move performed entirely with upper body strength. Seeing her success, clinicians added an extra step. Stabilize yourself with your knees, they said, suddenly putting her returning core and leg muscles to the test.

"Nothing about this is easy," Wahlert says. "But there was never a day where I got up thinking 'I don't want to do this.' You learn to trust this process. You trust that therapists never ask you to do something they don't believe you're capable of. And outside that comfort zone is where you find change.

"Sometimes you walk just 10 feet. Then it's 20. Then 50. Every day a little more. You don't always realize when the pieces come together. You might not realize you're seeing your own major breakthroughs. But, consistently, that progress was there."

From the beginning, Wahlert's goal wasn't just to return to Mitchellville. It was to return bearing some sense of control. She had never been the type to settle for helplessness. Defiant, resilient, relentless, she refused to be kept away from what mattered most. From her homestead farm house just east of Des Moines. From life with her husband, Brad. From her daughters and grandchildren and the nights the family enjoyed Wig and Pen Pizza. From work every day at Younker

Rehabilitation, even if it meant a role that looked a little more like case management than active nursing duty.

After nearly five months defined by familial isolation and grueling effort, Wahlert was able to celebrate that return.

When she arrived home, she found her yard adorned with signs, poster board panels staked into the soil, as a show of congratulations from her neighbors, her friends, her colleagues and coworkers.

"The Inspiration to Others Award Goes to: Debbie Wahlert," one read.

"Sometimes we're tested not to show our weakness, but to discover our strengths," read another.

Coming back to Mitchellville served as an emotional reunion for the entire community. And in Wahlert's extended absence, the town had provided its own helping hand, donating funds toward a major remodeling effort to make the house functional for her needs. The additions included a universally accessible bathroom, an expanded walk-in shower, and grab bars mounted to the walls.

The project, totaling over \$16,000, was completed at no cost to the Wahlert family.

"It's impossible to measure how important compassion is in a journey like this," Wahlert says. "When you're someone who

provides therapy, you're taught that it's crucial. But kindness can be the defining factor that gives a person the confidence to face a new normal and say, 'Yeah, I can do that.'"

Shadowed by covid-19, 2020 has represented hardship for many across the state and, indeed, the nation. That's truer for Debbie Wahlert than for most. And yet, despite the uncertainty, life has begun to take a familiar shape.

When not babysitting the grandkids or staying involved in her daughters' lives, Wahlert practices the therapy exercises that propelled her to newfound independence. She walks down stairs with only the light assistance of a guardrail now. Cooks



Debbie takes a break during physical therapy to share photos of her family with her therapists.

scrambled eggs in the morning, standing for extended periods.

In point of fact, she lives life on her own accord, writing a new chapter whose definitions she, and she alone, gets to author.

“I made my bed today,” she says, laughing. It’s as mundane as it sounds. But the mundane has its benefits, and if Wahlert’s story has any moral, the luxury of fits the bill.

“Before it all goes away, it’s natural to take things for granted. It’s not our fault, really. We don’t know any better. But now, I treasure everyday actions. That’s real importance. That’s something precious.”



Debbie drives an adaptive vehicle on the backroads of Omaha with QLI driving instructor and occupational therapist Ana Hancock.