

JOSH HANCOCK BECAME A PARAPLEGIC AFTER A FALL WHILE ICE CLIMBING IN WASHINGTON IN 2014

Paralysis can't stop Bend climber's reach

By Peter Madsen
WesCom News Service

Josh Hancock broke his back when he fell while ice climbing in Snoqualmie, Washington, on Dec. 4, 2014.

That was no small bump in the 35-year-old's ambitious, outdoorsy life. He became paraplegic, requiring him to use a wheelchair and rendering his three-story Seattle townhouse inaccessible. Hancock refused to let his injury stop him.

In the span of a year, he went from being dependent on medical bedside care to setting off on a year-long, 30,000-mile solo road trip in a modified van to learn the adaptive version of his favorite sports and find a new place to live. He landed in Bend.

Not surprisingly, Hancock has big plans for this summer. He intends to use an inflatable raft to row 80 miles of the Deschutes River, join friends on another raft trip on the Salmon River and surf the Oregon Coast.

That's leaving out all the mountain biking and road cycling Hancock plans to enjoy along some of his favorite Central Oregon routes, including the McKenzie Pass.

People often tell Hancock his resilience to continue living on his own outdoorsy terms is inspiring.

"Our joke in the adaptive community is that we call inspiration 'the i-word,'" said Hancock, referring to it as if it were a dirty word. "I ski, for example, because I like skiing — I don't do it for others' benefit."

Hancock learned how to sit ski through Bend-based Oregon Adaptive Sports on the slopes of Mount Bachelor, where he is now a fixture on winter mornings.

He is one of about 500 individuals this year who will receive some form of adaptive sports instruction from OAS, said Director Pat Addabbo.

Hancock is also one of several people with a physical disability who has moved to Bend in the past 18 months after making contact with the nonprofit.

"Just (Josh's) presence, pursuing everything that everyone else is pursuing, keeps people aware that there are people who visit here and who live here, who may not use the same types of equipment ... but they get all the same (benefits) of being outside and share the desire to be in all the same places."

Hancock doesn't want to



Joe Kline /WesCom News Service

Josh Hancock cross-country skis with his dog, Teemu, at Wanoga Sno-park west of Bend. Hancock became paraplegic after an ice climbing accident in 2014 and has since become active in a variety of adaptive sports.

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— Josh Hancock

sound glib about the people who gasp with admiration when they spot him making turns in a sit ski or tidying his RAM ProMaster van, which he accesses by pulling himself up a ramp with the help of a fixed rope and the upper body strength he's since regained.

"We're showing the positive outcomes, the resilience of human beings, to be adaptive," he said. "We show that you can get through this crap. You can still have fun — that's the chord we strike with people."

"This crap" is one way to describe the long journey, literal and personal, Hancock has traveled since he fell four stories while ice climbing.

The top rope, anchored to an overhead tree by a climbing partner, came undone.

Hancock still considers the climbing partner a friend.

"I recognize the mistake he made was probably less significant than a lot of mistakes I've made in my life, but this time, the consequences materialized," Hancock said. "We make mistakes all the time that don't end up hurting or killing someone. This event hurt him in different ways. A big way for me to comfortably relate to the event has revolved around seeing the humanity in him and trying to recognize his responsibility, but not blame him. And not get hung up on trying to make him into someone he's not

because of what happened."

'The road' to adaptation

Hancock stayed in a Seattle hospital for five weeks.

His parents supported him for another eight weeks as he relearned routines: how to get around in a wheelchair, make meals, shower, dress and drive his car, which was fitted with a hand-controlled brake and accelerator.

He had to move out of his three-story Seattle townhouse. Purchasing it was a personal milestone for Hancock, but it had become the "least accessible building on the planet," he said.

"I'm pretty forgetful, and I would sprint up and down those stairs, three at a time," Hancock said. "I was fit, and I loved to move my body. Then the house just turned into this impossible thing. I did crawl up the stairs, once, just to say goodbye to the place before some renters moved in."

Despite his supportive friends, Hancock could no

longer make Seattle work. For one thing, he couldn't ride his bike, which had liberated him from the traffic he now found himself stuck in.

His friends continued to climb and backcountry ski — Hancock's passions were interrupted. Seattle's hills, curbs and sidewalk cracks became Hancock's mountains, boulders and crags. He also had to accept new complications, which include no longer having bladder control. He has learned how to manage it, but there was a learning curve.

When he attends a get-together at someone's home, for example, he scopes out the bathroom and plans his visits accordingly, using intermittent catheterization to empty his bladder.

"I have to know what I've had to drink and stay ahead of it," he said.

'Precipitate' change

When Hancock achieved full independence, he drove his car on a solo road trip

to visit a friend in Idaho in March 2015 — four months after the fall. He compared the trip to sailing a boat across an ocean.

"There was nowhere for me to stop. The whole world felt like this place I couldn't go except for my friend's place 1,000 miles away," Hancock said. "When you're climbing really steep snow — let's say a 2,000-foot snow slope — you have this huge sense of commitment and exposure. There is nowhere to rest, and going down is much harder than going up. We use an expression 'Up is down,' and I had the same kind of feeling. Like, 'I'm out there,' in doing something so ordinary."

Hancock hit the road in January 2016 for 12 months. He drove his van to Bend where he hired a local company to build it out with a bed, sink and plenty of storage.

"Getting into my van is like a bouldering problem," Hancock said with a chuckle. "I joke a lot that climbing prepared me well for life with a spinal-cord injury."

During his year living in the van, Hancock said his goals were twofold: "I gave myself time to form a (new) identity and have that precipitate a location" to permanently relocate to.

He drove to Sun Valley, Idaho, and then to Jackson, Wyoming, where he stayed for a month. He circled through Salt Lake City and several Colorado mountain towns, including Steamboat Springs and Crested Butte, packing in many days honing his sit ski skills.

He rounded out the last days of spring skiing at Mammoth Mountain Ski Area in California. In Santa Monica and Newport Beach, Hancock learned adaptive

surfing.

In August, Hancock and his father explored the Grand Canyon while on a guided raft and kayak trip along the Colorado River. Throughout the road trip, Hancock kept bouncing through Bend, which he realized was the town that "did the most amount of right things for me," he said.

While still living in his van, which he often parked in front of a friend's wheelchair-accessible house, Hancock made an offer on a single-level residence in southeast Bend. In February 2017, he moved in. He has since brought a Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever puppy, which he named Teemu, into his life.

"Bend is big enough that it has some culture — some good places to eat, it has a theater," Hancock said. "I had relationships with people who really love living here."

Addabbo doesn't shy from the word inspiration when talking about Hancock's year-long journey in his van, adding that doing so is an ambitious, scary thing for anyone to do, able-bodied or otherwise.

"I think it took an incredible amount of resilience for Josh to sustain his climbing injury and to so quickly seek out the opportunities that he wanted," Addabbo said.

"I do find the trip he took inspirational. I think a lot of people think, 'Ah, how cool would it be to live in a van and ski all winter long.' But things get in the way. It's not always things like disabilities but jobs, budgets and bills. It's a risk to leave everything behind for six months or a year and go on that kind of journey. To do that ... shows a tremendous amount of resilience. It takes a lot of guts."

CANYON

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Another word like ravine that doesn't register on maps but has wide application here — on the land and in our everyday speech — is "breaks." A breaks is a rugged, staggered fall-away of land, a castellated brink. Our layercake geology lends itself to the formation of breaks — slopes stair-stepped with volcanic rims and gouged by draws — whether they're roughing up the sidewalls of canyons or the faces of escarpments, such as Mount Emily's east side.

The Minam breaks help define the northwestern Wallowa canyonlands. And the terraced slopes of Hells Canyon and its grand tributary chasms are some of the mightiest breaks in the world.

There's another interesting watercourse word mostly absent from our maps but widely used not far away: "coulee." This French-Canadian term, which means "to flow," holds a very interesting, localized geography in the United States, where, implying an often-dry gully, it appears in such far-flung corners as the Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin, parts of the Northern Great Plains, and — and here's our regional connection — the Columbia Plateau in Washington. There, coulee can refer to both a soft-edged swale through Palouse loess or a huge bedrock gulch — like Moses Coulee or the Grand Coulee itself — of the Channeled Scablands, hydraulically drilled by some of the greatest floods known in Earth's flood-washed history.

It might frighten you to learn that I could go on and on, but let me wind down with a reminder that it doesn't matter whether you call that drainage you cross on the trail of elk or morels a gully or gulch or ravine or canyon. Heck, you don't have to call it anything (though the idea that we humans know a thing by naming it seems about half-true). But if you have a particular attachment to one of these landform terms or another, or know of some unique ones here in our backyard, don't hesitate to let me know at eshaw.layoftheland@gmail.com.



Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

OTEC nominating committee members appointed

Baker City, Oregon (OTEC) — The Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative Board of Directors have appointed the following members to the director nominating committee for Baker and Union counties:

Positions 7 and 8 — Union County

Seats are currently held by incumbents Greg Howard and David Baum

- Donna Beverage 541-786-1492
- Mary West 541-910-4546
- Russell Lester 541-910-0906

Position 9 — Baker County

Seat is currently held by incumbent Charlene Chase

- Diana Brown 541-523-3679
- DeeDee Clarke 541-524-1999
- Fred Warner, Jr. 541-524-2040

The nominating committee handles interviewing and recommendations of qualified candidates for the 2019 OTEC Board of Directors elections. If you are a member of the cooperative and are interested in running for the OTEC Board of Directors, please contact one of the committee members in your county.

The committee has requested any members interested in stepping forward for consideration, please contact them on or before January 29, 2019.

The nominating committee must submit its nominations to the board secretary no later than February 1, 2019.

Any member wanting to petition for placement on the 2019 Board of Directors election ballot should contact Lea Gettle (541-524-2831) for the petition and conflict of interest forms.

Nominations by petition must be filed no later than March 5, 2019, must be signed by the candidate and include at least 50 OTEC members' signatures who are qualified to vote. In addition, there must be a request that the candidate's name be placed on the ballot.

A copy of the bylaws describing the terms of office, application and qualifications needed to serve on the nine-member board, along with a conflict of interest policy are available online at www.otecc.com/about/annual-meetings

Each director's term of office is for three years. The election will be completed at the annual meeting scheduled for Saturday, May 4, 2019, in John Day at the Grant County Fairgrounds. All OTEC members and their families are encouraged to attend.

About the cooperative

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative (OTEC) is a not-for-profit, member-owned electric cooperative that serves over 31,000 homes and businesses in four counties in Eastern Oregon. Headquartered in Baker City, OTEC has district offices in Burns, John Day and La Grande.