



# Embracing Change

and living as if this is all there is

The new year is a time for starting over, setting goals and writing resolutions of change. The initial decision to lose 10 pounds, save for that dream vacation or clean out the hall closet can be thrilling, but overtime can become over whelming or even borderline impossible.

But what happens when you are forced to change? A fall from a cliff, a diagnosis of ovarian cancer, or a divorce is a life-altering experience. *Wasatch Woman* magazine discovered three amazing women who have faced potential roadblocks — eventually walking and rolling over them to emerge even stronger on the other side.

Discover the thread of perseverance found in each of their stories. We glean strength from others to face our own inevitable challenges. In our life, our health or our wealth we all must learn to embrace change.

## your life *Meg Hendleman*

by Allison Hansen

Meg Hendleman is a typical 20-something, right down to her sporty silver Subaru and the silly string strewn across her apartment. The only difference is that she's on wheels.

"I fell off a cliff," she explains simply.

But it is not that simple, really.

Nearly four years ago, it was her trademark playful attitude that led to her accident. On a hike at a tortoise preserve in St. George, Meg and her companion were separated. Unalarmed, she channeled her adventurous spirit and began leaping boulders in her special grip shoes.

"I felt like Spider-Man," she says. Unfortunately, superhero powers couldn't save her. The layered red rocks caused an optical illusion, so she didn't see the ravine just a pace in front of her. She jumped right off the edge. It would be the last leap of her life.

"I actually laughed because it was so surprising," she says.

"I said out loud, 'I'm going to fall!' and then I shut my eyes real tight and I don't remember anything after that."

Even when she regained consciousness flat on her face in the

dirt 35 feet below, she felt no pain. A miracle, considering Meg shattered both femurs and both wrists, crushed her left collarbone, and broke four bones in her neck. "They think I either bounced off a wall or landed on all fours," she says matter-of-factly, like she's told the story so many times before.

In the hospital, her family begged the doctor not to tell her she'd be a quadriplegic for the rest of her life. Turns out, the diagnosis wasn't a curse, it became Meg's motivation.

"I started with the basics — to eat and to put on my makeup," she says of her rehabilitation. "Makeup first."

She recalls those intimidating initial days home from the hospital, wheelchair-bound. To start, she just sat on the back porch. Soon, she got antsy. "I decided I had two choices...I could sit there and watch the grass grow or I could get off my paralyzed tush and do something."

Meg chose the latter. Less than a year after her accident, she dialed the Ms. Wheelchair America organization and asked how she could compete. They told her there wasn't a Utah program,

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but she was undeterred. She collected private donations and went to the national finals as an independent delegate representing the state.

“I didn’t know anything!” She laughs, embarrassed. “I didn’t even know how to do a wheelie!”

Because of her inexperience in her wheelchair, she did not win the national title, but she was a shoo-in for the Spirit Award. Now she is the director of the Ms. Wheelchair Utah program, prepping for its third year of competition.

“It is an inner beauty pageant,” she says of the program, which involves interviews and speeches. “We’re just looking for role models.”

The volunteer job requires tireless hours of lobbying for sponsorships, recruiting contestants and organizing events. As a

fund-raiser, Meg sells calendars she has illustrated herself. She says she does it all for the chance to give back, to share her unique story and inspire other girls in wheelchairs.

“There are things I feel that I want them to feel. I have had a lot of things most wheelchair girls haven’t had. I have dated and kissed boys and danced.” She also shares with them her personal motto: “When life gets too hard to stand, keep on rolling.”

Perhaps it is that outlook that has prompted local hospitals to invite Meg to help newly paralyzed girls adjust, physically and emotionally.

“I tell them most things are hard the first time you try it. ‘Cause there really isn’t anything I can’t do. It is just hard.”

She also recently developed a program that offers service opportunities to patients in rehabilitation at Intermountain Health Care hospitals. The patients in Meg’s program do the service, instead of having service rendered to them.

“Their whole life in rehab is people doing stuff for them. People helping them eat, people getting their

pills for them, getting them drinks, fluffing their pillow, turning them over,” she says. By participating in service projects, like piecing together hygiene kits for the Red Cross, she says patients discover that despite their new boundaries, they can still accomplish great things. With this mental confidence and a positive

attitude, their physical rehabilitation is more effective.

Brad Zollinger, administrative director of rehabilitation services at Intermountain Medical Center, agrees wholeheartedly. “What this does for our program is help us to motivate patients to achieve their highest level of function. It helps us motivate patients to be independent and involved in society regardless of their disability. And it helps us manage patients’ attitudes,” Zollinger explains. “If a patient is happy and has hope, then they achieve a much better outcome from their rehabilitation. Particularly if they can keep a positive attitude despite their circumstance, it really helps in the recovery process.”

With Meg’s dimpled pink cheeks and permasmile, the parallels to Pollyanna are obvious. She just scoffs. “I seem really optimistic and sweet,” she says. “But I don’t have a lot of patience for a bad attitude.”

With Meg’s challenges, she could have a bad attitude if she wanted to. A former competitive dancer, she performed with the Utah State University ballroom dance team. She says she silently cried at a recent wedding reception when the DJ started playing Latin music, her favorite. “I thought, ‘Oh please, if I could just dance this one night.’”

As a vibrant, gorgeous young woman who “never stayed home two nights in a row,” it has also been tough to see the change in how others treat her. “People will get the door for me now,” she says. “But not for the same reason they used to.”

Still, in the same breath that she shares her challenges, she counts her blessings. Her eyes sparkle when she talks about her fiancé, Whit Johnson. Even their love story is inspirational: after her accident, Whit, a former flame, just started showing up at the hospital for weekly visits.

“It was so difficult to see someone you care about with so many struggles to face ahead,” Whit remembers. In fact, at his first visit, Meg was still tangled with tubes and could not even talk. When she returned home from the long hospital stay, their courtship was rekindled. Whit was the first to donate to her Ms. Wheelchair America fund; now he is her pageant co-director. When asked about what he loves most about his future bride, Whit answers with boyish charm: “She shines.”

Zollinger adds his perspective. “Meg has made one of the most remarkable recoveries of any patient we have had the opportunity to serve. She has really risen above her circumstances through hard work and a positive attitude.” Now that she’s a volunteer, he says “it inspires our patients when they see her situation and she is so happy. It gives them hope and encourages them to work hard on their own rehabilitation.”

Meg takes all this praise in stride.

“Whatever,” she rolls her eyes. “I’m not the end-all, be-all wheelchair chick.”

Some might disagree. **ww**

## Get involved.

We want you to share your message of inspiration! Be a contestant in the **2008 Ms. Wheelchair Utah Pageant** and show all Utahns what it’s really like to Rock n’ ROLL!

The pageant will be in September at Davis High School in Kaysville, Utah. MWU contestants must be 21 to 65 years old. Ms. Hotwheels contestants must be 12 to 20 years old.

Utah is one of a few states that raises the necessary funds for its titleholder to compete in the national Ms. Wheelchair America Pageant. MWU volunteers raise funds throughout the year by selling **MWU calendars**.



To become involved — as a contestant, volunteer, donor, or to buy calendars — call 801-529-3350 or visit [www.mswheelchairutah.org](http://www.mswheelchairutah.org)

