

PERSONALITIES

A spirit unbroken

David Oaks doesn't let paralysis stop him from advocating for others



PHOTO BY PAUL CARTER

David Oaks with his wife and caregiver, Debra, at home in Eugene. He fell off a ladder a year ago and broke his neck, throwing his life into a maelstrom of change. In a follow-up to an earlier story, Oaks talked about life after the accident and his philosophy of life. (Paul Carter/The Register-Guard)

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A year after a tumble from a ladder broke his neck and put him in intensive care for eight weeks, David Oaks is still paralyzed from the chest down.

He has minimal use of his arms and hands and relies entirely on his wife, Debra Nuñez, and a cadre of friends and caregivers for all of his daily care.

But Oaks' eyes still twinkle, his sense of humor is intact and he maintains contact via computer with fellow environmental and mental health advocates all over the world.

In fact, the 58-year-old Oaks, who now gets around in an electronically controlled wheelchair, engineered a bit of a protest rally last month.

He headed downtown to the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce with a half-dozen fellow activists, including Nuñez, to bestow the dubious Golden Ostrich Award upon the organization, "because of their support for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its blockade of progress on addressing the climate crisis."

Oaks speaks more laboriously than he used to — he uses a voice amplifier because of damage he sustained to his vocal chords from a combination of nicks incurred during surgery and a 107.8-degree fever he contracted during his stint in ICU — but nothing masks his excitement at still fighting the good fight for the causes he believes in.

"I'm still an activist," he said proudly. "I was one of the speakers when we gave the Chamber of Commerce the award for not responding adequately to the climate crisis."

Nationwide, 56 local chambers of commerce so far have cut ties with the national organization, Oaks said, and he has been pressuring the Eugene chamber to join the list of those that have rejected the national chamber's stated position on climate change, which is:

"Along with world economic growth, global greenhouse gas emissions are increasing. Regardless what this means for climate change, the private sector and Congress have expressed a very important common point of view, specifically: measures taken to address any stated climate change challenge — such as limiting greenhouse gas emissions to no more than double what they were in pre-industrial times — must not harm the United States economy."

A few weeks before delivering the award, “I had gotten an email message from the Eugene chamber saying that they were re-evaluating their connection to the U.S. chamber, but I haven’t heard anything since we gave them the award,” Oaks said with a mischievous grin.

“Something terrible ...”

His life-altering accident happened the rainy evening of Dec. 1, 2012, after Oaks had finished a writing session in the small, detached cottage in the couple’s back yard on City View Street. He went into the house, told Nuñez he needed to coax the couple’s cat, Bongo, down from the loft in the cottage and went back outside.

About 10 minutes later, Nuñez’s cellphone rang, and she heard him say, “Something terrible has happened.”

She rushed to the cottage to see Oaks hanging upside down, one ankle caught in the ladder to the loft. He had climbed up to reach the cat, his rain-slicked clog had slipped on the step, and he had fallen backward.

Luckily he had his cellphone in his pocket, wrestled it out and called her for help.

Oaks still remembers, as Nuñez crouched beside him, feeling the paralysis setting in, moving gradually from his feet up his legs and into his torso.

She remembers what he said to her: “I can’t feel my feet, now I can’t feel to my waist. Put your face by me — I think I’m leaving you.”

He had broken his neck and crushed bones in his chest that left him vulnerable to blood clots in the lungs, one of which collapsed during the ordeal.

His injuries were worse than they otherwise might have been because Oaks has a long history of ankylosing spondylitis, an inflammation of the spinal column and body joints that through time causes bones to fuse together and become both brittle and inflexible.

Help arrives in many forms

After two months in intensive care that included several surgeries — at that time the longest ICU stay on record at Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend —

Oaks was transported to the Craig Hospital in Denver, a facility that focuses on neuro-rehabilitation and research on spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries.

He returned home in mid-May to find out just how far his reach on behalf of others extended into the local community and beyond.

“There is no good place to break your neck, but if you have to, this community is the best place to do it,” Oaks said last Sunday afternoon, sitting in a wood-floored room spacious enough for his reclinable wheelchair, a large-screen combination computer monitor and television, a hospital-type bed and bookcases.

At one end of the room, French doors open onto a deck with a roof of transparent panels — “David sunned himself out there all summer,” Nuñez said.

A sliding door in the opposite wall reveals a fully disability-accessible bathroom.

Before Oaks’ accident, the bathroom wasn’t there, and the living room was sunken, its floor level a couple of feet lower than the rest of the house.

But friends and acquaintances who knew of his catastrophe had flocked to the house, while Oaks was in the Denver rehabilitation center, to make it suitable for his return.

Habitat for Humanity built the deck, and a friend who is a contractor designed and built the bathroom.

People the couple had known from their decades of camping at the Oregon Country Fair raised the living room floor and built a wheelchair ramp to the front door.

A local Mennonite congregation donated the cost of revamping the driveway and sidewalk.

“I remember coming home one day and there were eight contractors here,” Nuñez said with a laugh. “And besides all the people who worked on the house, many others David knows all around the world wrote letters and wanted to help.”

Some were people deeply affected in their own lives by Oaks’ advocacy through the years, especially in the area of rights for people with mental illness.

“I remember letters that said things like, ‘You saved my life. I’m sending a little bit of money — I live on SSI (disability), but I want to help,” Nuñez said.

It would take “many pages in The Register-Guard to thank all the people who have helped,” Oaks agreed.

“That’s the silver lining of spending your life in the social change movement — people know how easily some disaster can happen, and they want to help each other.”

Even his 96-year-old mother, Violet Oaks, has been involved in the thank-you task, sending personal notes to everyone who has helped, he said.

One person he had known through disability activities for decades “joked with me and said, ‘Hey David, you did not need to break your neck to establish your disability movement credentials,” Oaks recalled, “and I said, ‘Oh, now you tell me.’”

Sense of humor intact

Despite Bongo’s role in Oaks’ fall, the big gray cat still occupies an important part in the Oaks-Nuñez household.

“After everything that happened, I asked David if I should get rid of the cat, if it would be easier for him, and he said, ‘No,’” she said.

He and the cat “have played for many, many hours together,” Oaks said, remembering when Bongo was a kitten and used to curl up inside his vest as he worked at the computer. “I don’t blame Bongo for anything that happened.”

Sharing a zany sense of humor also helps them cope with the drastic change in their lives.

“I married David for his sense of humor,” Nuñez declared.

“I laughed so hard at our wedding, I literally sprained my neck. Now he entertains me when I cook — he sings and tells me stories — and I hear him and his aides laughing together all the time.”

Obviously, the couple's financial future has taken a drastic turn for the worse since Oaks' accident.

To be eligible for Medicaid services, they had to "spend down" their assets, including all of their retirement funds, which they used toward the renovation of their house to make it disability-friendly.

Oaks worked for 25 years as executive director of the nonprofit MindFreedom International, which he founded to advocate for people with psychiatric disabilities, including their right to self-determination in treatment, a position he relinquished after his accident.

The couple has health insurance through Nuñez's work at the Eugene Public Library, but out-of-pocket expenses are significant.

A group that calls itself Friends of David Oaks has raised enough money to purchase a wheelchair-accessible van and is working to help contribute to ongoing living expenses.

No letting up

Oaks begins his day at 7 a.m., when an aide awakens him and helps him bathe and dress for the day while Nuñez prepares breakfast.

"I often don't get really moving until about 10 a.m. or so, because it takes three to four hours to get up and get ready," Oaks said.

When he is, he spends time doing rehabilitative exercises, sometimes at home on a stationary bicycle-like apparatus that uses electrical impulses to help keep his legs healthy, or at Sacred Heart's rehab clinic in the University District.

He sees a psychologist regularly to keep his attitude and spirits adjusted.

"I've known him a long time through my advocacy work, and he's very good with people with major disabilities," Oaks said. "I used to talk to him at parties — now I talk to him professionally."

He spends time each day working on the Internet, following advocacy issues and maintaining a blog. In the evening, he, Nuñez and an aide often relax with a movie.

She talks about how crucial it is to get out of the house regularly and how hard it was a few weeks ago when everything was covered with snow and ice.

He turns that into musing whether such weather phenomena are becoming more severe and long-lasting and, if so, whether they are related to the “climate crisis.”

Regardless of anything else, the 1977 Harvard graduate who grew up in a working-class, devoutly Roman Catholic Lithuanian family on the South Side of Chicago — and who in his early 20s was diagnosed as “incurably schizophrenic” before taking charge of his own care and overcoming the label — continues to pursue the social advocacy that has been his life.

“I’m still on the board of the U.S. International Council on Disability — they’re pretty cool,” he said. “Right now, we’re working on a global treaty for the United Nations on disability rights. We’re also working on a similar bill in the U.S. Senate, and we hope to get it passed in 2014.

He smiles broadly.

“So, I’m still in there,” Oaks said.

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