



'Life is about responses not circumstances'

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Chris Norton says his goal is to walk across the stage to receive his college diploma next May. News Bulletin photo.

by Linda Girardi

A young man's inspirational journey from paralysis

Chris Norton has a goal to walk across the stage to accept his college diploma in May at Luther College in his hometown of Decorah, Iowa. Although he set out to balance life with academics as a "normal average kid" playing football and loving life, his life now is described as "miraculous" for all he has done.

Norton, 22, shared his story of persistence and inspiration to overcome the odds of a life-changing football injury in his freshman college year. "Just yesterday, I was able to take steps with a walker without the assistance of a therapist," he said.

The young man's heart-to-heart message was given Sept. 19 to an audience of some 250 Aurora University Spartans athletes, including the entire football team. "Life is about responses, not your circumstances. What determines your success and happiness is how you respond to life's obstacles," he said.

"It's important for this generation of athletes to hear his inspirational story about life as they come into adulthood, said Nicole Pieart, AU assistant athletic director for well-being.

"Chris likely has a far greater obstacle than most, but his message that we have the power through hope, dedication and hard-work can be applied in anyone's life," she said.

On October 16, 2010, Norton broke his neck and fractured his vertebrae in a collision when he tried to tackle a ball carrier on the opposing team. "I didn't realize what happened. I was face down and could smell the mud and grass. I suddenly felt motionless and confused."

Norton recalled an "unforgettable" turning point earlier in his life after a freshman high school basketball game when he had a self-defeated feeling. "My dad told me if I didn't like where I was to do something about it," he told the audience.

"Something clicked in my mind. I decided to channel my energy and work harder rather than feel sorry for myself. Little did I know how important that lesson would be in my life," he said from his wheelchair.

Norton refused to accept a "devastating" medical prognosis from doctors that he had only a three percent chance of ever regaining movement or feeling below his neck. He explained how he has intensified his therapy sessions and has worked on his successes every day.

“Through faith, family, friends and hard work, I have been able to defy the odds, but I am not done yet. I plan to walk across the stage for my graduation in May,” he said.

Norton shared he feels fortunate for his life. He now enjoys giving back by sharing his message with others and raising funds to improve the quality of therapy for individuals with spinal cord injuries (SCI) and other neuromuscular deficiencies.

AU Spartans defensive coordinator Benny Boyd coached Norton at Luther College and has kept the friendship. “I have long told him he was one of my heroes, and now watching what he has done is nothing short of miraculous,” Boyd said.

Norton’s foundation SCI CAN has raised \$275,000 in the past two years to purchase therapeutic equipment for facilities that cannot afford them. Norton spent three months as an in-patient and four months as an out-patient at the Mayo Clinic. He said many SCI patients are forced to leave medical centers too early and subsequently do not receive adequate therapy which results in limited health and recovery. His future goal for the foundation is to fund rehab centers to help prolong the recovery of patients. Visit scicanfoundation.com.

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