Rebel in a Wheelchair

by Michelle DalPont

BROWN dirt, gritty sand, jaw-breaking cement, and cold metal have all had their own special moment with John Box. He's crashed, collided, scraped, scorched, and knocked his way into their memory—ingraining their surfaces with blood, sweat, and unsurpassed joy. John Box is an adrenaline junkie, even if he scoffs at using such a term. He has driven cars to their breaking point, gunned the gas pedal to 140 miles per hour and peeled the window trim off. John has broken, bruised, re-broken, stitched, and scraped arms and legs as if it were child's play. Actually injuries were a common occurrence when he played as a child. Now that he's aged to a ripe old 43, John's daredevil title is still fully intact and preserved through his notorious crashes with his huge off-road, go-kart-like car known as a sandrail. John's life equation has always included adventure and injuries; the difference now is he has added a wife and subtracted two working legs.

The Neosporin abrasions of childhood fade in comparison to what John has suffered since the motorcycle accident that paralyzed him. In this accident John severed his aorta and punctured his lung. In one of his sandrail accidents, he broke his back. While welding and fixing motors, John has acquired multiple burns and skin grafts. Because of his paralysis he has endured pressure sores, bladder surgery, and kidney stones. Maybe the measure of his adventurousness lies in the number of hospital visits over the years. John has probably been to the hospital over 50 times. But he shrugs it off solemnly:

> "It's probably not as much as Evel Knievel."

When he isn't wearing his red hat, John's dirty blond hair is neatly gelled and spiked in little points not more than an inch thick. The bottom of his nose has a pinkish hue with little red veins on the tip. He wears square, black-rimmed glasses. A neatly trimmed, bushy blond mustache runs straight across his upper lip, and adds years to his boyish face. He wheels around on spunky red-tires and a flame patterned back rest, with side profiles of women on his billet wheels.

Neither his billet wheels nor his crazy stunts have scared Mary off over the years. John met Mary when he had been in a wheel chair for a number of years already. The wheelchair didn't stop Mary from liking him—or, for that matter, from even marrying him. John thought women would never really pay attention to a guy in a wheelchair, but after their first date Mary's attention was all on John. Her parents said that John was not fit to take care of her because of his paralysis. She didn't listen. She married him anyway. She says there was something about John, something special about his demeanor and the way he conducted himself.

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When John was seventeen and a half, he and his buddy, Kevin, were cruising on their motorcycles along Pacific Coast Highway. John felt pretty good that day. Kevin had just turned sixteen and they decided that they would visit the expensive car dealerships, like Ferrari and Porsche in Corona Del Mar. John was enjoying the freedom and the clean, salty air wrapping his Hawaiian-print shirt around his thin frame. He was riding ahead of Kevin, with an unknown motorcyclist in between. Kevin and John were in the right lane when a Mercedes Benz pulled out from the left lane and clipped John at 50 to 60 miles an hour. On the side of PCH, cars were lined up for miles along the shoreline. Flung off his bike, John skidded along the black concrete and into the axle of a raised Bronco on the side of the road. A nanosecond later, his bike scratched and scraped behind him and crushed him in against the Bronco's wheel axle. Meanwhile, the motorcyclist between John and Kevin stopped dead in the middle of the road, perhaps to watch John's crash. Kevin saw John fly off his bike, and the next instant he himself crashed into the stopped motorcyclist who had been in between them. Kevin flew off his bike and knocked the other guy off balance as well. Kevin got back on and rode his bike over to John. He found John pinned under the Bronco with nothing more than a shred of clothing on and his helmet. If Kevin hadn't convinced John to wear a helmet, John would not have survived. John hated wearing helmets. Now, looking down at his crushed and unconscious friend, Kevin wondered if John was still alive. When the paramedics arrived on the scene, John let out a few moans as he was being lifted onto the stretcher. Kevin would never before have dreamt that he'd be happy to hear such a sad sound. John was taken to Hoag Memorial, in Newport Beach. Kevin drove his bike down to the hospital with a broken foot, but didn't realize it until he got there.

In the trauma center, doctors opened John up. They were hunting for the source of his internal bleeding, trying to stanch the flow. They made an incision in John's back and used a rib spreader. The doctors closed him up, but a blood clot had formed on his spinal column, paralyzing him from the chest down. After hours and hours of lying on the operating table, and having his heart fail him twice, John was sent to the ICU. Tubes, wires and monitors engulfed John's frail, warped frame. Doctors gave him a five percent chance of survival.

At the time of his injury, the doctor told him that, basically, John had a mountain before him. He explained that John was metaphorically at the bottom of the mountain, but that could change depending on what he did with the news of his paralysis. You have the opportunity to overcome your position, he told John, and climb up the mountain.

"So kill myself or climb up a mountain," John thought. There it was, his two options set before him.

But what happens after you climb up the mountain? Are there no more obstacles? Do you stop trying? No. Recalling the answer to the question now, John smiles with laughing eyes, causing the yellow ring in his blue iris to glow.

"There are lots of other mountains," he says to me. "Mountains have nothing to do with being disabled. Mountains are opportunities."

When people realize they are paralyzed, many of them spiral down into a depression or denial. Some people live their lives in denial, never accepting it. John admits contemplating death, but that didn't last long. The doctor's words stuck with him. But it was more than that. John had always been headstrong and rebellious, even as a child. He never just gave in. And he certainly didn't stick to the norm.

Most kids during middle school and high school shy away from confrontations with bullies. John did not shy away. He went looking for bullies who picked on other kids—just in order to defend them. John would go looking for the biggest, baddest, meanest bullies to teach them a lesson, and teach it to them well. He only had one problem. He couldn't physically take them down. But that didn't stop John from trying. He would keep fighting and provoking the bully—until he got the crap beat out of him, or his brother Mike, who was ten times bigger and bulkier, would stop by and even the playing field. No matter how the previous situation had panned out, John was always ready for the next bully—determined to teach the bully his my-mind-is-stronger-than-your-big-matter principle.

"It's the best thing that ever happened to me," John says now about his motorcycle accident, without hesitation. Since his accident, John still remains a curiosity. His sense for adventure and mischief still cause him problems, but now the problems take on different forms because of his disability. One day, he was fixing the engine of his car and was sitting on the radiator for quite a while before he smelled something burning. Because he doesn't have sensation below his chest, he didn't know he had been burning his butt cheeks. He had to go to the hospital to get skin grafts because he had second- and third-degree burns. But still, John didn't stop. He continued repairing engines, building machines and welding metal—even if that meant dragging his lower body and pulling himself up into a lifted car, or accidentally and unknowingly lighting his leg on fire from sparks that flew off while he was welding, or using hand-brakes instead of his feet to drive his cars at alarming speeds.

Not long after his motorcycle accident, John began to play wheelchair tennis. First it started out as an activity he did to help his then-girlfriend practice to make the tennis high school team. When he was practicing one day a man approached him and asked him if he wanted to join a group of people that did wheelchair tennis at Cypress College. John took the invitation and played for 15 years after that, getting sponsored, traveling to Japan for tournaments, and rising up the tennis rankings to the highest division.

When John first started playing wheelchair tennis, his wheelchair needed some modifications. And he had to be comfortable and well-equipped in his chair to improve his tennis game. John decided to take the long, four-hour drive up north to visit his wheelchair manufacturer. When he arrived at the place, they didn't alter or fix anything on his wheelchair; they didn't even attempt to offer a solution. Furious, John did a lot of thinking on his four-hour drive back home. When he arrived at his house in Orange County, John and his brother Mike Box began to modify John's wheelchair. This whole ordeal became the catalyst behind John's future business.

Colours-N-Motion was established when John Box decided he had enough of unhelpful, uncaring and rude wheelchair manufacturers. He started the company in 1991 and was

officially incorporated in 1992. John did a year of number-crunching and market research before he decided to start his company. His brother, Mike, now known as "The Wheelchair Guru," helped John to modify chairs and come up with new, inventive ways of building them to be more accessible and more customized to the individual. As part of the marketing campaign, Colours used strong body language and controversial photos in their ads. The ads featured images of a bare-bellied pregnant lady in a wheelchair, a man with dreadlocks smiling at the camera, and a woman in a sensual pose lying on her back with her wheelchair tipped over—and they all carried captions on the top—"birth," "philosophy," and "sensuality." These ads rebelled against the status quo of advertisements for disabled people. They weren't safe, or boring, or sugar-coated—they were in-your-face, semi-nude shots of disabled people trying to express bold attitudes. The controversy exploded on the scene when writers for newspapers, medical professionals and everyday consumers thought that the photos were too graphic or misleading in one way or another. These people began to write letters to newspapers, publish articles in magazines, and write letters to John Box himself at how appalled they were. John didn't mind. He had gotten free publicity for Colours and it didn't bother him to be controversial or a bit rebellious—he relished it.

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At forty-three years old, John is still an "anomaly" as a Colours brand representative has said. John isn't what you'd expect of a guy in a wheelchair, but then again the expectations the general public has of people in wheelchairs are traditionally associated with pity and physical incompetence, accompanied by an alien-like curiosity of how people live their lives in wheelchairs. And John's never allowed people to pity him, or settled for incompetence—with or without a wheelchair. As for being something of a curiosity, well, John was a curiosity long before his accident.

On one of his first visits to the hospital, John was already setting the stage for the years to come. When he was three years old, he broke his arm playing with a neighborhood friend. He had been in the air balancing himself on his stomach while an older boy lay on his back, propping John up with his feet. John lost his balance and landed on his arm. He never even cried. The hospital personnel were thoroughly impressed with John's calm demeanor—not crying and hysteria-free, at an age where getting lost in the supermarket usually means the world has collapsed.

The youngest of three boys, John gave his older brothers a run for their money. John and his oldest brother Mike would compete for the blue-and-purple glory of who could get the most bruises, broken arms, and stitches. Looking back at those childhood days now, John just brushes it off as "minor stuff."

John and Mike are the closest of the three boys, because they both love hands-on joy rides, and gimme-some-action antics. John didn't really keep girls around for very long during his high school years—perhaps they couldn't handle his 140-mile-an-hour driving, or maybe they lost interest when he'd rather be installing a 395 big-block engine in his Camaro than cooing "I love you-s" over the phone.

From childhood to adolescence, John had a gift for injuring himself in daring activities that always involved a head rush of adrenaline. The staff at the hospital began to know the Box boys quite well. Mike and John had earned such a name for themselves. When their mom entered the hospital, one of the staff would say:

"Well, hi! Which one is it this time?"

It was usually John with a broken bone, or Mike in need of some stitches. John's leisure time was a sure bet for danger-prone activities. Like that one time that John and his friends tipped over a parked car as a prank, or the time when he put a gaping hole in the oil pan of his father's Pinto from trying to jump hills with the car, or the time that he burned his tires at 70 miles per hour on the freeway, or the time they went floating down the riverbed in Orange County on a waterbed as they were being scolded over a helicopter loudspeaker, or maybe even the time that they stole a man's wheelchair and used it to dump each other into a lagoon at Knott's Berry Farm.

Amidst the crazy antics over the years, John still maintains the calm demeanor he had when he broke his arm at three years old—unwavering even when he is at the height of an exciting story. Even if the tone in his voice is lighter and more vibrant, John's composure remains fairly the same— hunched over, with a readiness to read a person's body language and listen intently to what they're saying.

John doesn't have any speech impediments but he is slow to speak. Some people get all riled up when telling a story, but not John Box. His appearance changes slightly and his face lights up, but he doesn't talk exceedingly loud or fast. There is a certain lagging speed to what John says.

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Colours offers around seventeen different wheelchair models in total, with categories like Everyday, Sport, and Children's and names like Shockblade, Spazz, and Tremor. One might wonder where these names come from. John claims they throw around names at Colours meetings and the names that garner the most enthusiasm are chosen.

At the Colours headquarters in Norco, California, they manufacture and assemble the wheelchairs to custom-fit every buyer. If someone were to enter the warehouse part of the building they would see cubicle assigned for different tasks. Right in front of the doorway, colorful rolls of material and sewing machines make up the upholstery area; to the right of upholstery are rows and rows of all kinds tires, ranging in thickness and color: blue, yellow, red, black; and on the farthest right is the assembly and shipping area where the wheelchairs are put together and boxed for delivery. Directly in front of the assembly and shipping area is the welding section, where Mike is usually found with a black mask on and a torch in his hand, welding together pieces of lightweight yet sturdy aluminum rods for the frames of the wheelchairs. Before the wheelchairs are shipped out, they go through a rigorous checklist in the assembly area, consisting of multiple pages of measurements and diagrams that need to match up accordingly with each chair. All the parts of the chair are made in the U.S. A lot of businesses in the U.S. have

started outsourcing to lower labor costs, but John does not import any parts, even if it means less profit for Colours. He is proud to have all the parts made in the U.S.

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John has a lot of sayings, but his most notorious line concerns people not in wheelchairs—the able-bodied community. John Box refers to able-bodied people as T.A.B.—temporarily able-bodied persons.

People that can walk are "just waiting to be like us" John has said. It is just a matter of time before people end up in wheelchairs, whether that be through old age or accident.

"You just never know," John says commencing with an anecdote about a man who woke up one morning to find out he was paralyzed.

Although this T.A.B. idea, which he calls "tab" for short, may seem a cynical viewpoint, to John it is his reality. It might lie more along the lines of dark humor, or it may be as a sign of his pragmatism, but either way John likes it and he's sticking with it. So he hopes you see the wisdom or humor of it when he tells you about it.

John enjoys himself often because he has a good sense of humor and he likes to think he's funny. Although most times he indeed is funny, sometimes when he mistakenly thinks he's funny he will start to develop this slow smile that creeps over his whole face. At the start, his mouth slowly opens and his teeth begin to show. Gradually his smile curves into an open grin —at this point his eyebrows are slightly raised and his eyes are glowing out from the yellow ring in the middle and into the light blue shades of the outer perimeter. He leaves his mouth open for awhile, to illustrate for the person he's speaking with what a response is supposed to look like.

That's it…start with a smile and then open your mouth…a little more…a little more. Ok, perfect. Now laugh.

And while this is going on you're thinking to yourself *What is he doing? Why won't he close his mouth? Jeez, what a weird--Ohhhh ....I get it, he wants ME to laugh!*

His open mouth doesn't laugh, but it waits for its audience to laugh. If the other person doesn't conjure up the sound for a laugh, even a smile suffices for John. After all, John does need an indication that he was funny. At least give him the benefit of the doubt and smile for goodness' sake.

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John recently received a ticket for not making a complete stop at the sign in his neighborhood in Norco. While driving one night to dinner at Claim Jumper's, he recalls the event. He was totally "P. O.-ed" at the motorcycle cop for citing him just because he didn't stop for a full three seconds at the stop sign. The police officer turned on his lights and John rolled down his window and awaited the "B.S." he's was about to get from the cop. The cop told John that he didn't stop at the stop sign. He imitates his angry response to the cop:

"Do you do that? Do you really expect me to believe that you stop like that at a stop sign?" John says, referring to the three-second rule at stop signs.

Then John proceeds to mimic the policeman's pompous reply:

"Yes sir. I do." John says.

"That's B.S.!" John says, snapping back into his own feelings of anger and hitting the steering wheel of his white Ford Excursion.

Moments later, he calms down and says,

"Whatever dude."

A few days after the incident, John saw the same policeman once again. The officer saw John and waved at him. John cringed on the inside.

He had to settle a score. On the car ride back home from dinner, John starts to plot.

He has a brilliant idea: He'll go buy the cop donuts in the morning and then he'll give him a business card and tell the policeman:

"It's only a matter of time before you'll need it."

After all, the guy is on a motorcycle. John's lazy smile registers triumph.

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John has lots of sayings; almost any conversation can yield some catch-phrase. He has a mental library full of phrases that he waits to drop on different occasions. And if it's not a catch-phrase, John has the ability to make it feel philosophical—either way, it's a conscious effort to grab intellectual brownie points. In the office his saying is, "if you want something done, ask a busy person." To the able bodied it's his T.A. B. theory. At dinner his saying is a question: "Eat to Live? Or Live to Eat?" He says Mary lives to eat. But he doesn't try wild food combinations or daring side dishes. When out to eat, a baked potato and some ribs will do just fine. While wheeling himself out to the car after dinner John mentions that maybe to an Italian "Live to Eat" is more representative of who they are, but to him food is more of a basic necessity to survive. Then, he lifted himself into the driver's side of the car and Mary came up behind and scooped up his empty wheelchair. She loaded it into the back of their SUV and got in the passenger's side.

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"My problem is, it has to be logical." John tells me.

He doesn't talk about weather (unless in relation to something else) and he doesn't gossip. For the most part, there is one of two things going on: linear speech or a joke in the making. When going to eat lunch one grey afternoon at Islands, John wheels into his

spot at the head of the long table on the outdoor patio. A waiter hands him a menu. John sets it down and looks up at the waiter:

"Hi, I'm John. What's your name?"

"Henry." The waiter continues arranging place settings.

"Hi Henry. Nice to meet you." And then John continues flipping through the menu.

Most people don't tell the waiter their own names, or even bother to find out the waiter's name. But John has this simple straightforwardness when speaking that comes out as a formulaic politeness. Part of keeping it simple is his straightforward attitude—even his jokes have linear qualities.

I was sitting in his office one day discussing with him sayings and odd theories that I have. I was supposed to conduct an interview with him that day, so I had my three-by-five notebook out. I like smaller notebooks because they are easier to hold in the palm of my hand. He told me I needed a bigger notebook and then continued talking with me. At one point he cut me off and told me his impression of my theories:

"They must not be very long. It won't fit in your notebook."

After whichhe gave me a smile that slowly started to creep over his face. Yes, that one. Except this time it looked a little apologetic at the same time—like it's funny, but I know I'm making fun of you.

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What John likes most about his house are the tall doors and the tall ceilings. Its all about the "openness and freedom" he would say, arms stretched out and red hat on backwards. John also has a knack for collecting antique machines—from the 1930s in fact. He said it all started when his wife became fascinated with antique toasters. He started to buy her these toasters on EBay and then the buying developed into thousand-dollar investments in antique arcade games and candy machines. The hallway entrance of the house and dining room area are lined with all these antique wooden machines: for candy, pinball, gumballs, and prize-catching. The family room is a hodge-podge of brown, basket-weave furnishings and ceiling fans, mixed with clean country white and contemporary black appliances. Slightly odd, and yet perfectly inviting at the same time. An antique table, given to the Boxes from John's parents rests along the wall of the entrance hallway. Atop the table are a few pictures of John and Mary and then larger pictures of John and his yellow sandrail in the desert. John loves his monster sized, go-kart –like sandrail[1]. Both John and Mary like going to a notorious desert spot called Glamis several times a year with friends. Mary says the pictures of John and his sandrail are to commemorate

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[1] A sandrail looks like a huge go-kart that seats multiple people at a time. Its lightweight material is made for navigating sandy terrain.

John's various wrecks. John's friends on the Glamis trips will give him a framed picture after the trip usually, but John and Mary agree that this last time maybe his friends tried to stop encouraging John from wrecking the sandrail by not giving him a picture. John lives for going to Glamis. Meeting new people and hanging out, helping them out and making friends—that's what John loves about Glamis. John has damaged his sandrail three times already, maneuvering it and driving at alarming speeds. This last time, two months ago, John totaled his sandrail.

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Going 80 miles an hour on a drag strip in his sandrail at Glamis, John broke the spindle on his right tire and went spinning over, out of control.

"This is how I'm going to die," John thought.

"Honey, I love you."

John started to hear noises in the distance, yells and shouts from his wife, friends, and observers of the crash. He realized he was alive. He was airlifted and ended up having no permanent injuries—nothing broken, nothing fractured, just agonizing, stiff pain. He was fortunate not to have had his arms broken again, or his aorta severed, or his lung punctured, or anything torn, broken or split.

John looks back at this event now, and Mary knows exactly what he's thinking. If he were to die...

"That'd be the way I want to go out…in style."