

Corey Lovato
GoHawkeye Grant Essay

Please upload an essay telling us about your life and about your challenges and triumphs. How does participation in adaptive sports and recreation impact your life? How would this grant help you promote adaptive sports and improve the quality of your life?

At age 19, I was enjoying my first year of independence as a college freshman and exploring the budding start of my adulthood. I was doing well in school, had a steady girlfriend, good friends, and a healthy body thanks to a love of exercise and physical activity. I had grown up as a competitive swimmer since elementary school, spent a year in high school playing football, and loved finding ways to get outdoors in my home state of Colorado. One such love was snowboarding in the Rocky Mountains, which I did at least once a week to alleviate stress and immerse myself in nature. I would often go alone as a solitary meditation to clear my head with a prescription of crisp winter air and phenomenal views of pristine wilderness.



Hiking in Colorado, March 2007

Unfortunately, this bliss was not fated to me one sunny spring day in 2007. A terrain misjudgment sent me soaring into the air higher than I had ever experienced, then crashing back down to Earth. I slammed into the snow from forty feet above before skidding along on my back, finally stopping to stare up at a clear blue sky. I caught my breath for a minute, composed myself, and tried to get up. Something was wrong, my body would not respond to my commands. I could not move, all I could do was gaze up into the blue. What

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I did not know was that I had just broken my neck and destroyed my spinal cord. That is how I sustained my spinal cord injury, and how I came to need my wheelchair. That is how I became a quadriplegic.

The next ten days were spent in the intensive care unit of a Denver hospital. I vaguely remember the details: the helicopter flight for life, two emergency surgeries, struggling to breathe through pneumonia, broken ribs, and a collapsed lung. After that I spent four months at Craig Hospital, a facility specializing in rehabilitation for spinal cord injuries. During that time, I was fortunate enough to retain some movement in my arms. Though control of my legs, chest, and most of my hands remained lost, I nevertheless had what I needed to set about carving a future for myself.

My first challenge was depression, the mourning of the body I loved so much. Hearing the nurses and doctors refer to me as a “quadriplegic” triggered an agonizing slew of emotions. All the social judgments, the physical limitations, and the life I would miss out on shot through me each time that word was uttered. I thought of the afternoon hikes with my friends, swimming workouts after class, holding my girlfriend before a goodbye kiss, and how I’d never do any of them again. The sheer permanence and finality was overwhelming. No matter how hard I worked, how hard I tried, I could never get my body back. I felt so helpless, so powerless, waking each day to face challenges I had never imagined.

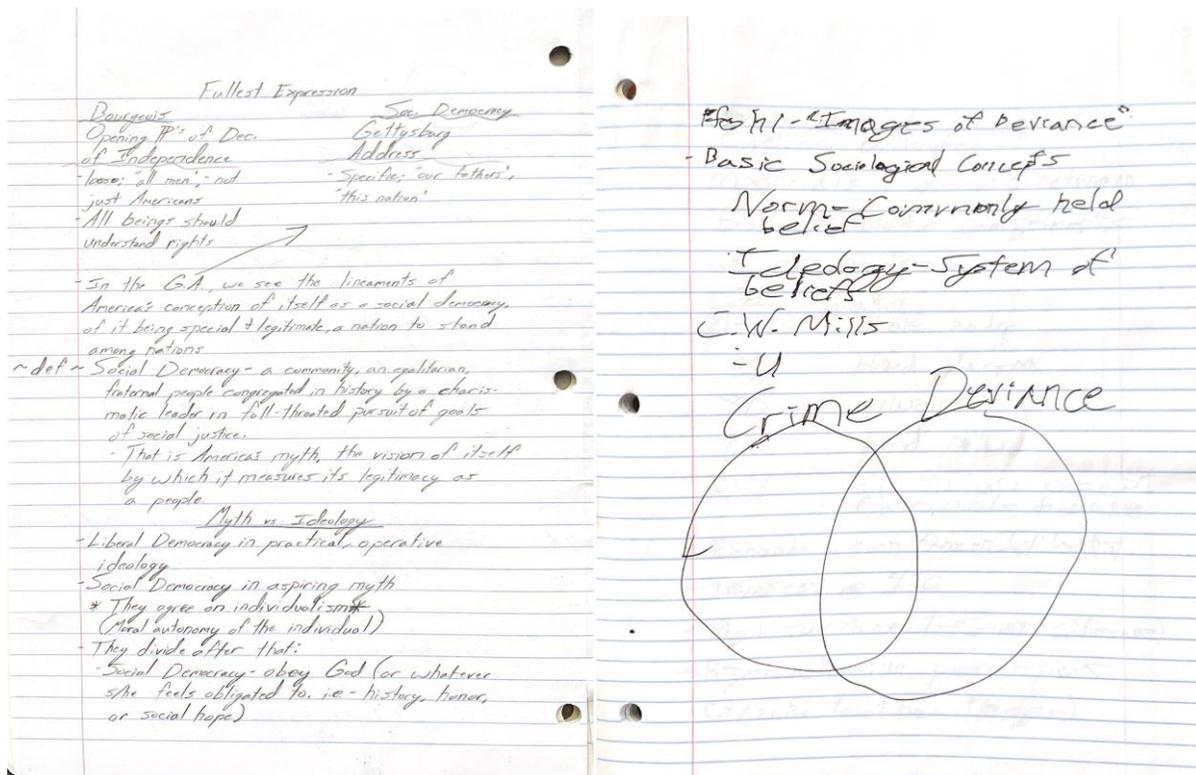
I had broken. My body, my spirit, and my mental health had each been torn down, seemingly forever. It was then, at my worst, most vulnerable time of despair, that I began to grow. I had bought into the idea that with my injury, I had lost my athleticism. How could I possibly be the same athlete without the tools I used to build myself? More importantly, who was I without the characteristic through which I so defined myself?

Lying there in the hospital, looking around at everyone else and what they were doing, I started to notice things. Things that might answer my questions. Every patient was newly injured, every person facing the same challenges. Some were coping, others not so much. I began to notice what set some people apart—it was the same thing I noticed in swimming practice every day growing up. The ones who were making it were the people who simply showed up, put their heads down, and worked. This seems obvious and intuitive, but in the grip of shock and depression it was anything but.

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Athletes are not made from muscle and sweat, and they are not classified according to how fast they can run or how high they can jump. Athleticism is a mental outlook, a temperament forged through diligent practice replicated daily for years, aimed to chip away at one eventual goal vaguely related to the initial dream of exalted achievement. Through the struggle, the goal fades in importance and pales in comparison to the finished product: a perpetual human work in progress trained to fight the battles and win the wars all stages of life will hurl at him. Athleticism is much deeper than its physical manifestation, and once it is established it becomes entrenched within the person of the athlete. It can be beaten down and cowed into hiding but never extinguished. Given the right nourishment it will always flare up and fan out, spreading again throughout the athlete and driving his desire to work, struggle, and achieve.

Somewhere between the days consumed with therapy, doctors, and my own plaguing thoughts, I had stumbled upon this truth. It could not hide forever, something so ingrained into my being could not stay dormant. I began approaching therapy as an athlete. At first it was just basic functioning, getting up and motioning through my days. As I advanced, I moved beyond functioning and began learning, taking on new tasks and beginning again to feed myself, dress myself, shower, shave, then transfer from my wheelchair into my bed, shower, and car. The same diligence, persistence, and work ethic from years of competitive athletics came roaring back, compelling me to learn, change, and grow. I learned so much that when I left Craig, the “real world” was not the same impossibly unattainable place it had been just four months earlier. Two weeks after leaving the hospital I was back for the fall semester of college and living in the dorms, albeit with the aid of a CNA each morning. I continued to make gains and moved past learning to challenging. Just like swimming, I worked every day and chipped away at each new obstacle. I could not write having lost movement in my hands, but instead of having someone take notes for me I opted to figure it out myself. By Christmas, I could write full sentences. By the time I graduated, I was taking essay exams in class next to everyone else.



Left: Class notes taken in February 2007 (pre-accident).
Right: Class notes taken in September 2007 (post-accident).

Though I harbored a deep-seated desire to succeed, success was not without many hardships in my journey through college. The steep Colorado terrain gave no lenience for my wheelchair, and neither did the snow and ice. The university bus system, which I relied on to get to class, was equipped with nonfunctioning or nonexistent wheelchair lifts and the drivers were not always trained to operate them. On several occasions, I had remained stuck on the bus for hours after a lift broke before I could get off. Maintenance workers piled snow onto buildings' access ramps in the winter, construction crews stored equipment on them in the summer, and classrooms rarely had space for me to sit. Each day was certain to bring with it the uncertainty of whether or not I would be able to attend the day's lecture.

Aside from my role as a student, avoiding many potential medical quagmires became another full-time job. I had to constantly check the skin I could not feel for bedsores resulting from continually sitting, remain diligent about how often I catheterized myself, and set alarms throughout the night to wake up and change positions in bed. An hour each day was devoted to sitting in the restroom, taking a suppository, and

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waiting for my bowels to empty. I had to take charge of all the things my body previously did on autopilot. Necessity was the driving factor; anything I missed could result in complications leading to an extended hospital stay, a stroke, or even death.

While my physical challenges were many, the abrupt change of my social dynamics proved to be the most difficult transition. Physical struggles are simple to perceive and understand, people are not. I still saw myself as the same athletic, confident young man I was five months earlier, but to everyone else this figure was a mystery. To them, I was always the guy in the wheelchair. New faces would smile gingerly and introduce themselves, careful not to offend. Their voices assumed a lighter tone, an upward inflection, as though they were speaking to a child. Hostesses would ignore me when I took my girlfriend out to dinner, focusing instead on anyone standing upright. Everywhere I went people apologized for illusionary offenses such as walking too close to me, the byproduct of an uncertain nervousness my presence evoked. When everyone else was “sir,” I was “bud.” I had become the other, perceived as different by a society unsure of how to interact with someone in a wheelchair, and I had changed before I could come to terms with it myself. I did not yet know who I was, and neither did anyone else.

Perception is the mother of interaction. As I came to cultivate my identity and again feel comfortable with myself, my interactions changed dramatically. The culture shock of sudden disability was slowly replaced by the realization that I had changed, but not as drastically as my outward appearance might imply. I had to discover that I am, and shall remain, me. I had to unearth the same fun, caring, hard working person that was so hidden to a society programmed to equate a wheelchair exclusively with despair—the same society that programmed me.

It happened as profound change often does, a seamless evolution while I was busy grinding through college. The culmination of all the struggles, the milestones, and the uphill climb had instilled a familiar confidence. I became me again, moved past the scared teenager alone on the mountain to find an ambitious young man who had been buried under a pile of fear and doubt. My wheelchair is no longer an anchor. It is not a symbol of what I cannot do, it is a symbol of what I have done. Today I have no CNA to help me begin my days. No one else cooks my food, cleans my home, does my laundry, or takes me grocery

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shopping. No one else found me a job and no one else gets me to work on time. I have reclaimed my life, become capable of thriving, and am excited for my future to unfold. Whatever obstacles may lie before me are nothing more than temporary deviations from a life I firmly command.

Though the road was long, it has taken me far. Four years after starting college, I found myself at a graduation ceremony in front of the people who love me. I heard my name, rolled across center stage, and accepted my degree. Even with my injury, it wasn't a day late. Four years, two majors, and one humbling experience empowered everything human within me to flourish.

Seizing my degree, I enrolled in law school and moved to California to tackle my new goal—alone. It brought many of the same challenges, enhanced to match the grueling schoolwork. I spent most of my first semester in law school pushing my wheelchair to and from the mile-long journey to class, my book bag bursting with heavy law books and a laptop, because the university's bus ramps did not work and no one was trained to operate them anyway. When I complained to the university, the head of disability services told me it was my responsibility to prove that I needed the buses before they would be fixed. When I asked for a ride to the disability services office—located at the top of the largest hill on campus—she met me in a golf cart and told me I'd have to leave my wheelchair behind. When I pushed for accessible buses, she suggested that I use a powered scooter instead of my wheelchair to get around. Never mind that such a device was impossible to use with my disability, not recommended by my doctors and likely to give me a pressure sore, or that it would afford me no exercise through the entire day. When I petitioned for exam accommodations due to my deficient hand movement, she protested, "but I've seen you write and use a cell phone!" never mind the doctor's note that supported my request. The message each time was clear: your lack of equality is *your* problem.

Discrimination never stung as hard as when I started law school. In pursuit of the discipline synonymous with justice, I was second-class. The feeling stayed with me as long as I was there. But I didn't give up. I pushed my wheelchair to class, I stayed in the library until it closed, and three years after I started I added the letters "J.D." to my name.

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The problems in our world are plentiful because the solutions are hard. They require persistence, patience, and the will to persevere against something much greater and more difficult than any one person can handle. They require an athlete, and I welcome the challenge. My degrees are my weapons, they shape my thoughts, my strategy, and serve as my authority to legitimize my positions and draft the blueprint for my attack. With these qualifications comes real power, the ability to change minds and move the gears that make great things possible. Thirteen years of dealing with a spinal cord injury has done nothing but hone my skills and feed my passion.

Far beyond the trauma of my trials at Craig, I have rediscovered the caring, dedicated, driven person my injury tried to steal. I now work at the Arizona Center for Disability Law advocating for people with disabilities. My clients find themselves with spinal cord injuries, or brain injuries, or PTSD, or thrust onto any number of journeys through which they have learned that the road is hard and it is unfair. Instead of using my degree purely to secure a lucrative financial career, each nonprofit paycheck comes with a far more precious gift—my clients know they will never be second-class.

After finishing law school, I found myself back in possession of an athlete’s mindset but lacking the corresponding physique. Seven years of intensive studies brought a side effect of a neglected body, but seven years of intensive struggle delivered the game plan to change that. In 2016, I adopted a New Year’s resolution to get back into the gym. I haven’t looked back since, piling on nearly 30 pounds of muscle along the way.



My wheelchair is no longer a symbol of what I cannot do, it is a symbol of what I have done.

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I do not currently own any sports equipment, but do my best to get out anyway.

I write this essay in pursuit of my next goal—I want my wilderness back. I want to wake up on a Saturday morning excited to explore and adventure, then taste the freedom on the Arizona breeze while I run through the scenery with my dog and my girlfriend. I want to ride for hours with my friends, take weekend bike excursions to Sedona, and tell my clients how they can do the same. I want to tell people, to *show* people, that an athlete cannot be broken. Most of all, I want a little more of me back. I want to liberate another piece of that Colorado kid, and I want to let him roam the wild—wheelchair be damned. I am an athlete, I am a quadriplegic, and I have work to do.