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ARTICLE BRIANNA RANDALL | PHOTOGRAPHY PAMELA DUNN-PARRISH, LUANNE HORTING, AND JOE STONE

Seven years ago on Friday, August 13, Joe Stone fell out of the sky. He'd been cruising over Mount Jumbo with his speed-wing, a fit and happy 25-year-old who was thrilled to be living out his lifelong dream of flying by soaring over Missoula's golden peaks on summer afternoons. Usually, those daily flights were idyllic—both for the pilot and those on the ground watching his colorful wing.

But Joe's crash was a nightmare. It left him in a coma for one month and in the hospital for four months, where he emerged a C-7 quadriplegic impaired in all four limbs.

Rather than sink into the multi-year depression that many spinal injury patients endure, Joe set a goal to motivate him through his recovery: handcycle Going-to-the-Sun Road, a 50-mile-long ride end to end including the 12-mile section that climbs 2,500 feet to Logan Pass in Glacier National Park, on the one-year anniversary of the accident.

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HE DID IT.

"I try to celebrate life on every anniversary of my accident," said Joe. "It's my second birthday, really. I could've died very easily that day."

After conquering Glacier, Joe decided to set his sights on the next goal: becoming the first quadriplegic to compete in an Ironman triathlon.

He did that, too.

"For me, after the accident, I knew that the outdoors was the answer—if there was any answer—to bringing back my quality of life," he said.

The other answer was the support and love of his partner, Amy Rosendahl, the adventure-loving woman who moved from Minnesota to Missoula with Joe in 2009. "When I woke up from the coma, Amy said, 'I'll be with you 100% through this, but only if you want me to be with you,'" Joe recalled. "The idea of not having her beside me would've been worse than the injury."

You might've seen Stone around town. Besides the low-profile wheelchair, the first thing you notice are his blue eyes. Intense, smiling, they take it all in. The second thing you notice is his trusty service dog, Henry, with equally watchful eyes. Joe, Henry, and Amy like being outdoors best, biking through the woods, rafting in the rivers, skiing down slopes, or—for Joe—flying over the mountains. Again, despite everything.

BUT THOSE ARE JUST JOE'S SIDE HOBBIES.

What really puts fire in his belly is demanding equal opportunities for people with disabilities, a label that applies to one in five Americans—the largest minority group in the country. (It's also a minority that anyone could become part of at any time due to circumstance or injury.) Yet even though living with a disability is relatively common, being disabled still carries a stigma.

Joe works hard to try and overcome that stigma in our society. Specifically, he's focusing on increasing opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in outdoor sports. Joe is rewriting the rules of the game for athletes with disabilities around the world, starting right here in Missoula.

To Joe, equality means inclusion—allowing everyone to participate rather than segregating or restricting people with disabilities from able-bodied events. That's why he ended up challenging the Missoula Marathon.

"Before the accident, I didn't know what minorities went through. I didn't understand discrimination—the feeling of having someone tell me, 'You can't do that,'" explained Joe.

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The first time Joe experienced discrimination was when he was denied access to the Missoula Marathon in 2013, which—at the time—didn't allow handcycles or racing wheelchairs. At first, he was deflated. But Joe rebounded quickly. He spent two years working with Run Wild Missoula (the group that organizes the marathon) and the Montana Human Rights Bureau to educate others on disability rights. The eventual offer of judgement found Run Wild Missoula guilty of discrimination under the Americans with Disability Act. The case now sets a precedent around the country for allowing people with disabilities to compete alongside everyone else.

“AT THE END OF THE DAY, IT'S ABOUT GIVING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES THE FREEDOM TO MAKE THEIR OWN CHOICES ABOUT WHAT'S BEST FOR THEM.” HE SAID.

To further opportunities for people with disabilities, Stone started a foundation dedicated to promoting adapted outdoor recreation. For instance, the foundation organizes adaptive gear for athletes with disabilities who are interested in participating in events like the Wydaho Rendezvous, an annual mountain bike festival in the Grand Tetons. Stone hopes to strategically scale-up the foundation to “get more people outside to play.”

Joe's day job, though, is motivational speaking. He's been invited to tell his story at schools, hospitals, businesses, and events across the nation.

When asked about his rising fame, Stone shrugs it off with a characteristic grin crinkling the corners of his blue eyes. “It's just me up there, no bells and whistles,” he said. “I'm not a performer. It's raw and real.”

The moral of Joe's raw and real story? “Include everyone.”

Joe avoids what he calls “the hero line,” and instead talks candidly about the struggle of getting to where he is now—the painstaking, arduous process of re-learning how to breathe, to swallow, to talk—and how he was motivated not to give up by the idea of getting back to

the places he loved best: mountains, rivers, sky.

“Struggles are where we learn from, what we relate to. Crossing the finish line feels like a small percentage of what it's all about,” Joe said.

Amy often comes with him to lend her own motivation and advice as the partner of someone with a spinal cord injury. This year, the couple's speaking calendar is filling up fast, thanks in part to the release of a feature-length documentary film about Joe and his attempt to complete a full Ironman. *It's Raining, So What* premiered online November 24, 2016, garnering tens of thousands of views from people interested in “pushing through boundaries of perceived limitations to find out what is truly possible.”

Joe is scheduling their speaking gigs and film premieres around recreation activities, including the three Ironman races that Amy is competing in this summer. The couple is also planning to spend time in Utah, where Joe will continue learning how to use adaptive equipment to paraglide and BASE jump through Project Airtime, a non-profit dedicated to helping people with disabilities fly.

“The first time I got back in the air again after the accident was the first time that I felt normal since becoming disabled,” he said. “Flying felt just the same as before. That's the most powerful part about it.”

Eventually Joe hopes to raise money to build or buy his own paragliding tricycle so that he can once again soar over the golden mountains in his hometown of Missoula. But he's not in any hurry, and stresses the importance of balance in life.

“What I learned from the accident is that there's a lot more to life than recreational hobbies. So much more, it's about communities, families, giving back,” said Joe. “That's what I want to focus on.”

Learn more about Joe's story at MeetJoeStone.com where you can find links to *It's Raining, So What* as well as two recent podcasts produced by Outside Online.

*Joe and Amy with their dogs,
Henry and Little Bean*

