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News

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****Tragedy turns student to a different kind of career.**

DALLAS—Don Cummings has always been an outdoorsman. His parents are missionaries in Ecuador so he was born in Quito and grew up in South America. Mountain-climbing and fishing in out-of-the-way places were an important part of his growing up.

When Cummings lost his legs at age 19, one of his major goals was to return to South America and see if he could get back to his favorite fishing places.

"I had to use forearm crutches, and on what was a four-hour hike before, I rode horseback. But I did it. I got to most of the places I used to go to. That was a major triumph," says the student. "I can't say things are the same. But you can't say you can't do things. You just have to do them differently."

Now Don Cummings has a mission -- to help amputees and patients with other disabilities utilize physical aids and to give them information about what to expect.

He is one of the first four students in a new bachelor's degree program designed to do just that. The School of Allied Health Sciences of The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas admitted its first class in Prosthetics and Orthotics in September.

When Cummings lost his legs, nobody told him what to expect. "And I didn't know enough to know what questions to ask," he recalls.

The first time he wore his artificial legs in the water, he was on a canoe trip with his girl friend on the Guadalupe River. The canoe ran aground, and without thinking he jumped out to lift it off the rocks. He was shocked to discover that in the knee-deep water his new prosthetic legs floated. He was unable to stand in the flowing water and had to let go and float downstream until he could stand up.

It had never occurred to him that the legs would float. Now he knows a lot more -- he has developed the muscle control to manage that set of plastic legs, and he has a less buoyant pair that are waterproof -- just for canoeing and fishing.

Cummings learned about the new program in Prosthetics and Orthotics when he called SAHS to check on the requirements for another program. At that time he was working on a bachelor's degree in Special Education at The University of Texas at Dallas. He received that degree in June 1981.

Students in the new program are learning that it takes a variety of talents to be a prosthetist/orthotist. "You have to be artistic and creative," says Cummings. "It takes a bit of the sculptor's eye. When you finish legs, you have to match the other limb and the skin color."

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It also helps to be something of an engineer. And program director Bruce McClellan emphasizes patient management and rehabilitation.

Don Cummings knows from experience how important rehabilitation is. Both his legs were amputated below the knee just before his 19th birthday. He suffered an infection (meningococcemia) that caused the death of tissue in his feet and legs. At the time he was in his freshman year of college in Longview (Texas) studying journalism and business. During four months in the hospital he went from 145 to 95 pounds. It was 10 months before he walked again. He missed a year of school.

In January 1979 he started walking again. While attending junior college to "catch up," he became interested in Special Education. "I knew I wanted to work with the handicapped," he says. While attending UTD, he started working in a prosthetics-orthotics lab, the one that fabricated his legs, as a part-time prosthetic technician. As soon as he graduated from UTD, he started working full time and taking science courses to prepare for application to the Prosthetics and Orthotics Program.

He doesn't mind talking about his experiences as a user of prostheses.

"Your body image changes," says Cummings. "At first you feel like you're walking on plastic stilts. But then you become very sensitive, and your prostheses become a part of you. You can tell if you're standing on a rock.

"Now I have a different set of rules. I have to compensate when I walk down a ramp or walk on ice. I don't run. I think I could with the right prostheses, but it's not worth it."

The student plays wheelchair basketball, lifts weights and works out in a wheelchair to keep up his strength. He used to work out daily by going around White Rock Lake (nine miles) in a wheelchair. But now with a wife, school and a job he doesn't have time for that anymore.

His wife Karen, the woman who was temporarily grounded in the canoe, was a fellow student in Special Education at UTD. She now teaches at George Washington Carver Elementary School in Dallas.

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