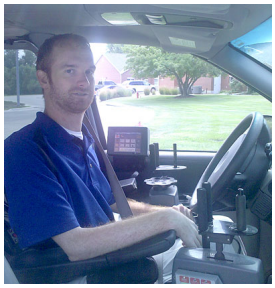

This is a story about a young man's persistent goal of pursuing a normal life following a paralyzing accident. Randy Tvrdik is a Wheatland High School graduate who accepted his limitations and learned to live independently. His story is reprinted here with permission from Quality Living, Inc.

In many ways, finding Quality Living, Inc. (QLI) on the Internet five years ago when her son, Randy, needed assistance was a Godsend for Mitzi Tvrdik.

As Randy's primary caregiver after he suffered incomplete paralysis from a spinal cord injury incurred while joking around with friends in a shallow river near his home in Elsie, Neb., she and husband, Lonnie, found themselves doing too much for him–unintentionally taking a lot of the initiative away from him to do more for himself.

"It had just become too easy for us to do things for him, and it wasn't helping him in any way to become more self-sufficient and independent," Mitzi said. "So we decided to take the next step. We found QLI's website, did our research about the organization, and knew almost immediately it was exactly where he needed to be to take the next step in his life."

Almost a year removed from his accident, Randy had been living at home with his parents for more than seven months and was doing outpatient physical and occupational therapy several times a week at his hometown hospital.

Lonnie noticed he was not only becoming very dependent but also wasn't using his hands –of which he had some limited use–as much as he could or should.

"Despite excellent care from surrounding communities, Randy needed to find a place that would provide more opportunities for a person in his position," Lonnie said. "Randy was very active and athletic before the injury, and we knew he was bored being at home with mom and

dad. He needed to get out on his own and make a life for himself."

The family visited QLI in late May 2006 and instantly knew it was the best place for Randy to take the next step in his post-injury journey. They met with QLI clinical and residential staff, toured the campus, talked with some other residents and their families and quickly learned QLI was the ideal setting for Randy.

Randy, who was equally eager to become more independent and learn to do basic things like cook and manage his daily life in order to return to school (he was studying pre-physical therapy and athletic training at Doane College when he was injured), responded right away to the change in environment.

He said the socialization part of his therapy at QLI–getting out into the community to eat and shop, letting down his guard regarding his injury and learning to work with his strengths and limitations–were equally if not more important than his physical therapy toward his continued development.

"Coming to QLI opened my eyes to the fact that there were people in far worse situations than mine, and that I had the opportunity in front of me to live as independent a life as I wanted to; it was up to me," said Randy, who learned to fill water jugs, cook meals, open doors and take care of some of his own daily needs during his seven months at QLI.

"I accepted my injury pretty quickly after it happened, so I didn't go through the anger and denial of my situation like others do. I think my background in physical therapy and athletic training contributed to that, plus my elementary P.E. teacher was in a wheelchair and was a very positive role model for me. I was able to move forward in taking more control and acceptance for my life and what I wanted in the future."

Shortly after discharging from QLI in January 2007, Randy returned to school at Clarkson College in Omaha and went on to earn his degree in health care business in December 2008. He returned to the Lincoln area to be closer to friends and attend outpatient physical therapy a couple times a week while living independently.

Once again, it was Lonnie and Mitzi who reached into their bag of tough love to motivate Randy to get a job and take another step forward in his life.

"They told me they were done supporting me (financially) and I had to find a job or move back home with them," Randy said. "That was great motivation for me because I had really built a good life for myself in Lincoln and I didn't want to give that up. My dad was a banker with experience in the financial field, so I applied at Waddell Reed and was hired as a financial advisor doing financial planning for retirement, education, etc."

Having been a terrific athlete prior to injury–he played quarterback on his high school football team, small forward on the basketball team and also ran track, played baseball and was a proficient golfer–Randy said not being able to participate in those sports is tough but he finds other ways to remain active as a spectator and playing fantasy sports.

When he thinks back on how far he's come since that fateful day that changed his life in 2005, Randy, who returns to QLI frequently to teach a spinal cord injury class to employees, said he has become fiercely independent and accepts that life often happens beyond our control.

He acknowledges it's what we choose to do with the opportunities that arise out of those circumstances that make us who we are and test us to push ourselves even when we may not want to.

"When I was at QLI, I spent a lot of time with a resident who had lived with his spinal cord injury for 17 years before deciding to get some help and become more independent in his own life," Randy said. "That taught me that it's never too late to learn, and it's OK to reach out and ask for

help because everyone needs help in their lives.

“When you’re disabled and reliant upon others to a degree, it’s easy to just let them do everything for you. But it takes more courage to step up and work toward doing more things for yourself. It’s not always easy, but it’s definitely better in the long run.”