

The FREEMAN'S 2018
CITIZEN
of the
YEAR

Bryon Riesch

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Bryon Riesch does not wait for life's circumstances to define him. Instead, he has taken one of the greatest hardships imaginable — becoming a quadriplegic after a freak accident in college — to launch a nonprofit that has helped countless lives through personal grants and medical research investment. Those who know and love him would say that he has taken a disadvantage and used it to his advantage to help change the world — one grant and one joke at a time.

For his ability to find joy in pain, to raise millions of dollars for medical research and personal grants, and to inspire a community much larger than Waukesha's borders, Bryon Riesch has been named the 2018 Freeman Citizen of the Year.

The accident

The day Riesch became paralyzed is imprinted on his and his family's minds — April 25, 1998. He was a freshman at Marquette University and was partaking in a

party when he dived down a Slip 'n Slide in a competition to see who could slide the farthest. During the slide, Riesch's arm got under his chin and pushed his head backward, causing a spinal injury.

Riesch recalls lying at the end of the water toy not being able to move and knowing he was paralyzed. He spent three months in the hospital and about 25 days in the intensive care unit.

His diagnosis: He was a C5 incomplete quadriplegic. The damage was done near his fifth spinal cord, causing him to lose

the use of many parts of his body. Riesch still has control over his shoulders and biceps, but not his hands, triceps nor wrists. He also has feeling throughout the body, so when someone tickles his feet he gets upset, Riesch joked.

Through the years, Riesch said he has been able to get some movement back and feeling has improved, but the biggest area of improvement for his life has been the result of technology.

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Mary Catanese/Special to The Freeman

The 2018 Freeman Citizen of the Year is Bryon Riesch, seen here at R&R Insurance.

“He is an absolute hero to so many people and he doesn't even realize it.”

— **Janet Curtis**,
 the director of development
 for the Bryon Riesch
 Paralysis Foundation

'He is an inspiration to everyone who meets him'

Riesch

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"It was a tragic accident but he certainly has worked extremely hard and diligently to make the most of his life," his father, Ken, said.

The rehabilitation

Riesch counts himself blessed because he has a family who was able to support him emotionally and physically by helping him to regain his independence.

"How do you make yourself the most productive while still being healthy and getting on with your life?" Bryon Riesch said. "It's always been a challenge. In my life I have been unbelievably blessed. I have an unbelievable family. I have a great support system. I have a great community. I have great friends. I have lucked out to have come from a family that has means where I am lucky enough to have a house where I can get in and out of. I can feel independent. I have a van that I can get in and out and go places and have people to help me."

Shortly after his accident, he recalls his father visiting him. Riesch asked his son if he wanted to live or die and Bryon couldn't help but wonder about the timing of his father's question. But, the question got Bryon thinking and he knew he wanted to live. The follow-up question from Ken Riesch was: Do you think you can be a productive member of society? Riesch answered that he thought he could do that.

"And he said, 'Whenever you get a chance, you reach out your hand and you will be amazed at what you get back' and I have tried to live that my whole life — reach out my hand to other people — and I have really, truly been amazed at what I have gotten back," Bryon Riesch said.

The foundation
The Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation started as a golf outing to benefit Riesch. But when the organizers approached Bryon to plan the event for the second year, he said he wanted to raise money for others. They chose the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation. Two years later, in 2001, they started the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation.

"My goal has always been the same, my dream has been to walk again and move again and try new things," Riesch said. "I knew at the time of my accident that I was never going to be able to be a researcher to make that happen," but he added, he knew that through his family and his personality he'd be able to raise money for medical research.

The annual golf outing has grown to raise about \$400,000 annually with 400 people attending. "The best thing about it is we have been able to make a difference, whether that's research grants or charitable grants or scholarships. Over the years you can see how our impact really made a difference not only in my life, but in a lot of people's lives who have been affected by a neurological disorder," he said.

Riesch said paralysis of a family member can be a great financial burden, from acquiring a motorized wheelchair that can cost \$40,000 to a \$25,000 ramp for a \$30,000 van. There's also the process of making a home accessible by equipping it with a ramp, bars in the bathroom and a new bed.

This is an area where the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation is happy to help. It has provided grants to individuals for something as simple as a shower chair, but

for that individual, it can be life-changing.

In the 20 years that Riesch and his friends have been raising money they have collected more than \$5 million and have added more events to the foundation's lineup, such as a fashion show and a bowling tournament.

"I am lucky. I am kind of like a figurehead for this whole thing. While my name gets put on it, there's really so many other people who do so much work from our board to our volunteers that I almost feel guilty sometimes because I feel like I am the one who normally gets credit for it. Their work is what makes it happen. It's them that propel me, that give me hope, which keeps me going. You see someone else working their butt off to help you and guess what, you are going to do the same thing."

While Riesch may remain humble about his involvement with the foundation's accomplishments, those around him say he is the reason for its success.

"He is a key motivator and inspirational leader to make a lot of that happen," Ken Riesch said.

Inspiring others

Carolyn Hahn, a board member of the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation, nominated Riesch to be the Freeman Citizen of the Year. She said his pursuit of finding a cure for paralysis inspires her, as does his selflessness.

"His goal is to provide a cure for paralysis for other people," she said. "There are so many other people affected and he wants to help them. It's never about him."

Riesch was also nominated by Suzanne Frank.

"Our community has become much more inclusive of people with disabilities through such events as Bryon's Run/Walk/Roll to Cure Paralysis. This is How We Roll Fashion Show, and BRPF Team Sports Challenge among others," she wrote in her nomination. "Bryon's partnerships with the Medical College of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Adaptive Sports Association, Marquette and Carroll universities have added so much to all of our lives here. Bryon, who is just 40, does all this from his wheelchair! He is an inspiration to everyone who meets him. I cannot think of a better person to receive this award."

Foundation funding

Through the years, the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation has established ties with several places of academia in the area, including Marquette University, the Medical College of Wisconsin and Carroll University.

Riesch said some of the money raised by the foundation also has been used as seed money for research and to develop and flesh out ideas that can then be used to acquire larger grants.

The foundation has worked with a gene therapist at the Medical College of Wisconsin to find a cure for paralysis. The \$20,000 they gave him over the course of several years has led him to get about \$5 million in grant money that was put toward developing the ability to implant stem cells into a spine that improves the person's movement, Riesch said.

Some other medical research and technology that the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation has invested in is DTI imaging, which is similar to an MRI and takes images of a spinal cord. Those images can help illustrate if a person might be able to eventually walk again or could regain hand movement.

"It's so cool for me to be in



One of Bryon Riesch's favorite hobbies is fishing.

Submitted photo



The Riesch family poses for a photo in 2014: from left to right, back row, Ken, Jack and Jeannie; and front row, Bryon, Stephanie and Mikey.



Mary Catanese/Special to The Freeman

Bryon Riesch stops to talk with Jake Helland as he passes by at R&R Insurance.



Riley Enright takes a break from training for a marathon to capture a photo with Bryon Riesch.



Kailey Knapp gets ready for a Marquette game with her uncle Bryon Riesch.

To learn more about the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation, go to <http://brpf.org>

the midst of all this. To be able to see this. To be able to see people get better and to have hope and dreams. The reality is that stuff is really happening and people no longer have to necessarily hope, but believe that this going to be," Riesch said. He said he's excited to see the paralysis research being conducted in Milwaukee and Waukesha counties, as well as southeastern Wisconsin.

Two jobs

With the amount of events the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation now holds, it sounds like a full-time job for Riesch, but he considers it his second job. He works about 30 hours per week as a project manager at his family's R&R Insurance business in Waukesha.

Prior to joining R&R Insurance, Riesch worked in the IT department at Northwestern Mutual for seven years.

It gives someone," he said. "The ability to go outside and make a living and not be dependent on someone else."

Upbeat and appreciative

It's impossible to describe Riesch without first starting with his humor. Shortly after shaking a person's hand, he starts making the person feel at ease with a joke or a witty comment.

Only a short time after becoming paralyzed, Riesch was able to laugh at himself. He recalls how his leg would sometimes have spasms and jump around during class at Marquette University. He said everyone would look at him and he'd exclaim, "Oh, my god, I can move!"

"You can't cry about it. You might as well laugh about it," Riesch said about his injury.

Janet Curtis, the director of development for the Bryon Riesch Paralysis Foundation, admires Bryon's ability to remain upbeat.

"He is the kindest person. You don't hear him complain really hardly ever about his adversities. What I always really marvel at is in his situation, he has not had a lot of control over his life. ... He could be kind of down and complain about it; he never does. He is always really grateful and appreciative when you help him out," she said.

While some people may tend to shy away from those with disabilities, Curtis said Riesch takes away those barriers for them and makes them feel relaxed.

"He has taught me to laugh. He has some great one-liners that make me very grateful that I work with him," she said.

And for many people he meets, Bryon becomes their role model.

"Bryon is a constant reminder to me of what it takes to beat adversity. He is an absolute hero to so many people and he doesn't even realize it," she said.

Family and friends

For those closest to Bryon, they don't see a paralyzed man, they see a brother, son, uncle or best friend.

"We all look at Bryon as if he is an able-bodied member of the family and we have gotten used to that," Ken Riesch said. "And because of Bryon we have gotten to meet a whole new group of people."

His sister, Stephanie Riesch-Knapp, describes Bryon as a dreamer.

"You know he is trying to make life better for himself and for all of those around him," she said. "He doesn't give up, even though he has faced some of the most difficult stuff I have seen anyone face. I think he has done a tremendous job of overcoming his disability."

For Riesch-Knapp's children who are 8, 4 and 5 months old, they have never known Bryon any other way than with a disability.

"They embrace him for who he is; they don't see him in a wheelchair. He truly loves them," she said. "And whether it's dancing with the nieces and nephews or making jokes with his siblings, Riesch makes others happy."

"He's my older brother and he's very competitive, very fun, down to earth and outgoing," Riesch-Knapp said. "He's fun to be around. People gravitate toward him because it makes people happy to be around him. He's like a good drug."

She added, "He truly respects people for who they are. He doesn't judge because he has been through so much in his life. He is really able to be on the same level as people no matter what circumstances they face."

Hobbies

Some of Bryon's biggest hobbies are watching basketball, especially Marquette games, and viewing the games with his nieces and nephews. He even makes it to every home game.

Before his injury, Riesch was an avid sports player, participating in varsity basketball and golf and even winning state championships. Paralysis has not kept Riesch from fishing at his family's cabin on Lac La Belle. He is able to cast the line with an adaptive reel that allows him to pull in catches.

But it's basketball that really gets his heart pumping.

Ken Riesch recalls how Bryon is always on the phones with his nieces and nephews while the game is on, talking about it. In addition, he has coached basketball since becoming a quadriplegic, Ken Riesch said.

Other interests for Riesch include shuffleboard, binge-watching Netflix, history and having dinner with friends.

The future

When asked about the future, Riesch said he's committed to helping R&R Insurance continue to grow and transition to its new headquarters in the City of Pewaukee.

He also remains committed to continuing to help the community that has helped him so much.

"It's not often you look at your life and say this is why I am here," Riesch said.

His father knows there is a lot more his son will accomplish.

"Bryon is a very caring young man that has channeled a terrible injury into some pretty big successes and I don't think there is an end to what he can do," he said. "A lot of times I think he's just scratching the surface."