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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“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
Riesch
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It was a tragic accident but he has been able to make a difference, whether that's raising money or helping others. He is an inspiration to everyone who meets him.

The rehabilitation
Riesch amazed himself because he has a family who was able to help him regain his independence. “How do you move from the most productive while still being healthy and get better at getting on with your life?” Bryan Riesch said. “It was always a challenge. In my case, we were extremely blessed. I have an unbelievable family. I have a great support system. I have a great community. I have great friends. I have backed out of being a family that has means where I have been used to have a house where I can get in and out, and 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 relocated his father visiting him. Riesch, in his son’s words, “wants no help or the family. Bryan couldn’t help but wonder about the timing of his father’s question. But, the question got Bryan thinking and he knew he wanted his family to be a part of it. 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 could pull your hand and you will feel what it is like to get back and I have tried to live that my whole life—reach out to other people—and I truly have not been amazed at what I have gotten back.” Bryan 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.

“My goal has always been the same, my dream has been to walk again and move again and try new things,” he added. “If he knew that through his family and his personality he’d be able to raise money for medical research.

The annual golf outing has raised about $400,000 annually with 400 people in attendance.

“The best thing about it is we have been able to make a difference, whether that’s raising funds for research, helping people that need help, or helping people that need help,” he added. “I knew that through his family and his personality he’d be able to raise money for medical research.

The future
When asked about the future, Riesch said he has to make a decision about how long he will play. He said he wants to be a part of the Marquette basketball that really gets his heart pumping.

Ken Riesch recalls how Bryan is always on the player with his pieces and inners while the game is on, talking about it. In addition, he has coached basketball becoming a head coach at Seton Catholic.

Other interests for Riesch include hanging out with his family’s cabin on Lac La Belle. He is able to cast the lines. He has coached basketball and golf and even watched starting young on ships.

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