



## Spotlight on Yannick Benjamin

It feels just like yesterday when my mother came up to me one afternoon and told me that my cousin, Guy, in France was paralyzed. My first reaction, “Thank goodness he is still alive!” But the second thing that I said



was, “How hard could it be to be in a wheelchair?” Well, I can tell you right now, I was never more wrong about something I said! Ironically, I was in car accident a few months later that left me paralyzed at the same level as my cousin. We are both T6 complete. I have been sitting on this Ti-Lite ZRA wheelchair for close

to six years now, but there are lots of days when I am sitting somewhere else for instance, on an airplane seat visiting some of the world’s top vineyards.

**“How hard could it be to be in a wheelchair”**

That’s right: vineyards. Wine is my ultimate passion. It’s what keeps me going and most of

all, what completes me as a person. When I tell people about this there is always a look of confusion but it also leaves them intrigued. I usually have to explain that wine is not just about drinking. It’s a subject where history, culture and geography are rolled into one, and true understanding requires appreciating all the great stories that come with each wine.

If I told you that wine is what got me through the beginning stages of my injury, your next question would be, “How many wines were you drinking?” It actually was

not drinking wine but reading about amazing places like Argentina, New Zealand or Hungary that helped me. When I was in the hospital or having a bad day, I was picturing myself there.

My first two months in the hospital were the most difficult, even with my mental winery tours. It was devastating to learn that certain functions of my body would never be the same. I mean: here I was, a 25-year-old guy, married just 3 months, re-learning how to use the bathroom! My wife, Angela, dedicated her life to helping me recover. She would sleep on the hospital floor every night and would wake up early in the morning to help me get ready for PT before she went to work, so that I would never be late for therapy. She researched adaptive equipment and advocated on my behalf with the doctors and insurance companies, all the while encouraging me to keep working on recovering my independence.

**“I wouldn’t admit to myself that I wasn’t OK”**

Eventually it was time for discharge and I was very motivated to conquer the world. Well, I should say I was too motivated for my own good. As soon as I got home I wasted no time. I went to PT twice a week and school three times a week. I was like a bull in a China shop, in a rush to go back to my usual routine the way it was before my accident, and no one was going to stop me. Within a few months I was back at work full time. I was so proud of myself, thinking that I had beaten the odds. I proved them all wrong. Everyone who suggested that I would need some time to adjust before going back to work was wrong. I was busier than ever – injured less than a year and doing more than most people I knew. I was fine...but it was all a lie.

Looking back I know what the problem was: I was so stubborn. I realize now that I was in complete denial, acting as if I was still the same able-bodied guy who was walking around four months prior. I wouldn’t admit to myself that I wasn’t ok. I was not taking care of what was important in my life and I pushed all those that loved me to the side — after all, they wanted me to slow down and take care of myself and I didn’t want to hear it.

(continued on pg. 20)

## Spotlight on Yannick Benjamin continued from pg.2

I was still having accidents. On my first day in wine school (where I wanted to make a good impression), just as I was about to go into class, I noticed my pants were soaking wet. I was so furious I just wanted to punch anything that was in sight. But being hard-headed, I went to my class and managed to cover my soaked pants. Talk about embarrassing! But I was determined to continue with my career and I wasn't going to let wet pants stop me.

I continued working long hours, having accidents, pushing my wheelchair longer and longer distances, keeping up my usual fast pace until the worst happened: I developed a pressure sore. I soon began to get sick and was in and out of the hospital for six months in 2005. What started off as a little red spot was now a stage four pressure ulcer, fully open with no potential of closing up. My life came to a screeching halt.



I was ordered to be on bed rest to help promote healing of the pressure sore. It was a beautiful summer and I was stuck lying on my stomach with absolutely nothing to do but think about the very thing my busy schedule had prevented me from dealing with, my paralysis. Not even my wine books could distract me. I was now 26 years old and had the attitude of an old

grumpy man; I had shut myself out from those who were closest to me and I was generally pretty miserable, bitter and depressed. I eventually decided to go for flap surgery to close the open pressure sore, which meant another three weeks in the hospital.

Over those three weeks in the hospital I had plenty of time to reflect. If I was going to be able to live the kind of life I dreamed of, I had to make a new plan. I had to take care of my body and get healthy. Pushing myself to the limit physically every day had to stop. I had always enjoyed working in the fast pace environment of restaurants, but the long hours were punishing and I just couldn't do it anymore. Luckily, within a month of my discharge I was offered a job working at a wine

store in the West Village called Le Du's Wines. It was a big transition from the restaurant business, but at Le Du's I would still be working in the industry and could continue studying to become a Master Wine Sommelier, on a less brutal schedule.

My co-workers are great and they made me feel very welcome. I started to teach wine classes at the store and enjoy the best part of the job: traveling. I am actually flying to places like California, Seattle, Chicago, and Las Vegas on a regular basis to check out vineyards and discover new wines for the store. Soon I will be going to Europe as well.



I also do lots of wine competitions, which consist of a theory exam of about 50 questions, some food and wine pairings, and the hardest part all, the Blind Tasting portion. The Blind Tasting requires that you identify 6 wines within 25 minutes; and you have to describe their color, nose, palate, and come up with a final conclusion as to country, vintage, and grape while the only thing you know about the wine is its color - you are on the spot to come up with the rest of the details. In 2008 I finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Best Sommelier in America Competition, and I placed second in the US in 2007.

I recently did the ING NYC Marathon 2008 on my own everyday wheelchair. It was probably one of the hardest things I ever did, but it was well worth it and I was honored to be one of the recipients of the 2008 Avis Spirit Award. Given by the New York Road Runners and Avis Rent A Car, this award "celebrates people who endeavor to overcome considerable obstacles through courage and extraordinary effort". I don't know about the courage but I can tell you that 26.2 miles takes an awful lot of effort! With help from the Challenged Athlete's Foundation I just got fitted for a racing chair so I can tackle the 2009 NYC Marathon on a little more comfortable ride. I can't wait until it's delivered so I can start training. (continued on next pg)