Everybody’s so different; I haven’t changed

Your gift helped Tom to continue taking care of the farm he loves.

Five years ago, Thomas bought his dream farm near the shores of Lake Winnipesaukee. A beautiful piece of property that Tom named “Long Legs Farm,” after his and his then girlfriend’s long legs.

In his semi-retired state, Tom spent most of his time turning his property into a working farm. He was selling chickens, eggs, turkey’s and pigs, with plans to harvest maple syrup and furnish Wolfeboro with fresh organic produce. Having been a natural farmer for most his life, he and his girlfriend wrote and were approved for a USDA grant to build a large greenhouse. He’d planted his acre of pollinating plants, a requirement of the grant, and was soon to start construction on the greenhouse.

But the farmland wasn’t all that Tom needed to take care of; a portion of the farmhouse roof needed replacing. One August morning while working on the failing roof Tom’s life changed forever. He placed all his weight on his left hand while using a screw gun with this right hand. The dew was out, the metal panels were wet and before he knew it, his left hand slipped, and he found himself twisting and tumbling to the ground. The way he landed broke his spinal column and damaged the spinal cord, resulting in paraplegia at the T12 level and becoming a wheelchair user.

“When this first happens, you go into your head. You can’t make decisions. You’re just trying to breathe, let alone figuring out how to sneeze or cough. You are a baby again,” says Tom. “I never got angry—frustrated. To be told by your circumstances, in no uncertain terms, that you’ll have to do something different with your life was demoralizing to come to terms with.”

But Tom wasn’t happy accepting that. After (continued on page 3)
Welcome

I am fortunate enough to be serving as the new CEO of GSIL; my new role as CEO is both humbling and beyond exciting. I will be working with so many passionate people whose mission is aligned with mine, helping those often forgotten about, and providing a voice for those unable to advocate for themselves. I have served on the Board of Director’s for Granite State Independent Living for the past two and a half years, most recently as the 1st Vice-Chair.

GSIL grew tremendously under the leadership of our former CEO, Clyde Terry. My goal is to keep the momentum going, reaching even more consumers and identifying new opportunities we can offer to those we serve.

My passion and everlasting motivation come from my son, Matthew, who was born with multiple physical and developmental disabilities. Those who knew Matthew would say he was compassionate, funny, and of course, a friend to everyone who was lucky enough to come into his life. As a paraplegic, Matthew was also a Special Olympian who won many metals competing in 100 meter wheelchair race and his personal favorite, the wheelchair slalom. When Matthew was born, 31 years ago, the direction of my life changed. Without him, I would likely not be here at Granite State Independent Living. While Matthew is now an angel, I know he is standing beside me, cheering me on.

GSIL is always looking to enhance the services we currently offer and reach additional folks living with disabilities. In an ever-changing environment, we want to stay true to our mission around quality of life with independence. To do this, we must identify creative ways to make this happen. Today, GSIL is in a great place to make this happen; we have a strong commitment from our employees, and now is the time to evaluate what we do and how we do it. With your help, we can accomplish this!

Without your support of our mission, so many would be living a life very different than what they are able to with the help of GSIL. In this issue of Giving Matters, you will read about Thomas and how he continues to live life independently after his accident. His story of independence is inspirational and encouraging to all. You make that possible for him. Thank you.

With your support, we all make a difference.

All the best,

Deb

Deborah Ritcey, MPA/HA
President & Chief Executive Officer
his injury, he connected with GSIL and New Hampshire-United Spinal Association, a program within GSIL. Thomas first met his mentor Mark [GSIL employee, a man with paraplegia and chair user] in the rehabilitation setting and when he got home, he contacted Mark. Mark was able to assist Thomas with resources so that he could make choices, make new friends that knew exactly what he went through and was shown, and told, that he could still chase after his dreams and goals.

After his accident, in his words, Tom’s personal life was “destroyed.” “Mark [from GSIL] was my only friend/peer at this early time who understood. He helped get me out of the house to attend peer support meetings and other socialization activities and to network with other peers, people that knew exactly what I was going through. Mark helped me realize that I was actually lucky. I could have been injured much worse.”

“We get energy from each other. We get strength. It helps put life back into balance.” Tom notes that his biggest challenge has been the depression that sets in. “You’re so alone in your new self. Just to see someone else doing it, it’s an impact on your brain. You see it is doable.”

And doable is what Tom shoots for. He lives alone now on his beautiful farm and has found a way to do almost everything that needs to be done. On any given day you can find him feeding/watering his chickens, tending to his garden, cutting/splitting wood or mowing the lawn. “My joy is pretty much my lawn mower,” he says laughing, “it gets me places my chair won’t easily take me.”

In asking about the future, Tom has big plans. While he used GSIL’s benefit counseling and employment services, he’s not sure he’s ready to add employment into his stress and daily routine just yet. He plans to focus on what he can do to advocate for those with disabilities who use a wheelchair, and legislative bills that may have an impact on their quality of life.

Thomas is a new member on the NH Spinal Cord Injury Advisory Board and will be traveling to Las Vegas this fall for the national United Spinal Association chapter leadership conference. “I want to run an idea by some of my peers that I have on helping local businesses, restaurants in particular, to make their buildings accessible.” While he finds most places to be wheelchair accessible, there’s still many places in the older communities that have no access. “I sit and look at this coffee shop, one of the older buildings in town, and I cannot go inside.”

“GSIL helped me get through the rough part of my journey. When this happens, your friends and family don’t know how to deal with it. They are uncomfortable. They are afraid and think you’re fragile, that you have changed.” But from Tom’s point of view, he hasn’t changed. He’s adapted. He’s learned a new way of life. A new way of doing the things he’s always done. He gets frustrated; he needs a full day to recover from splitting wood for three hours. But he still does it. He still has his dream farm, when so many told him he couldn’t.

One thing he wants people to know? “It’s like the lyrics in that old Joe Walsh song. Everybody’s so different. I haven’t changed. I just can’t walk - that’s all!”

Thomas is just one of the many people that YOU, our donor, help each year. With your support, people facing life-altering injuries can learn the skills they need, be supported, and live life independently, on their terms. Just like Tom.
Thank YOU! You really came through for us during our 8th annual Hoops on Wheels! This was our biggest and best year yet with 24 teams! Thank you to our sponsors, the players, and those of you who supported them. You brought in over $40,000 to support the GSIL mission!
A Fine Farewell

On July 9th, almost 200 individuals came out to celebrate former GSIL CEO Clyde Terry’s retirement at the Grappone Center in Concord. To recognize Clyde’s many years of service to the disability community, commendations were presented by the offices of U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Senator Maggie Hassan, Congresswoman Ann Kuster, Gov. Chris Sununu, Senator Lou D’Allesandro and the NH Secretary of State’s Office.

“Clyde’s vision of giving voice to this community through advocacy is now a core component of GSIL’s mission,” said GSIL Board Chair Eric Schlepphorst. To honor Clyde and support his legacy, the Board of Directors established the Clyde E. Terry Advocacy Fund to help provide the resources needed to enhance consumer participation in our Advocacy Program and increase digital publication of current advocacy issues.

After a presentation of the “Many Hats of Clyde” and a fun look at his Bucket List, Clyde gave his thank you's and ended his moving speech with these words of wisdom: “For people with disabilities justice means to be judged by the content of their character, not by discarded stereotypes or fear. Justice means for us all to embrace the many differences among us and see the promise and potential within us all. For when we do this, we take back the soul of America and form a more perfect union.”

Donations to the Clyde E. Terry Advocacy Fund can be made online at www.gsil.org/advocacy.

Funding Highlights

A special thanks to....

Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation for their 2019 support of our Spinal Cord Injury program – the program that provides support to Thomas, and many others living with spinal cord injury in NH.

Many thanks to our foundation and corporate friends for their recent support:

• NH Alliance for College & Career Readiness - $5,000 to help establish a fund in partnership with North Country businesses to cover costs for Driver’s Education for at-risk students with disabilities in the North Country. This will help overcome transportation barriers affecting both students beginning their careers and businesses with workforce needs.

• Concord Walmart and Sam’s Club - Community Grant Program in support of GSIL mission

• Northeast Delta Dental – Continued support of GSIL events

• Concord Bingo Too, LLC – Proceeds from Charitable Gaming at Keene Casino

• Lincoln Financial Foundation – Matching gifts

Special thanks to the following businesses for their new support!

• Christopher P. Williams Architects, PLLC

• Union Bank

• Wharf Industries Printing, Inc.

• Annkissam

• Cormack Construction
Introducing the GSIL Independence Legacy Society

In May 2019 the board of directors of Granite State Independent Living formally created the GSIL Independence Legacy (IL) Society to celebrate and thank individuals who choose to support GSIL through a planned gift. Individuals who make gifts to the IL Society share our vision to promote quality of life with independence for individuals with disabilities and seniors.

A planned gift can provide a meaningful and impactful way to support the GSIL critical mission through your estate plan or will. Your thoughtful foresight, generosity and commitment can help ensure that GSIL will be here to support those facing disability and seniors for years to come while providing you with additional financial benefits that might include federal income tax and estate tax deductions.

Commitments can be made in a variety of ways, including designating a fixed dollar amount or percentage of your estate, property, or stock, or making GSIL a beneficiary of your retirement accounts.

We are so pleased, through the IL Society, to recognize the individuals who are planning for gifts today that will provide significant benefits to GSIL in the future. To discuss your estate plans or join the Independence Legacy Society, please contact our Development Department at 603-228-9680, or development@gsil.org. You can also learn more at www.gsil.org/waystogive.

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Get involved in this year’s tournament: www.gsil.org/golf.

Find us on social media! 

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