

Life Accidents Changes Life Path

By Courtney Hoffman

Campus Editor

From his long, curly beard to the greenish, fading tattoos that read “TRUE GRIT” across his knuckles, 47-year-old Jeff Hazzard may not be the stereotypical portrait of a social work major. But when a pair of accidents in 2010 left the mountain-biking, snowboarding construction worker relying on cane assistance to walk, he went back to school and found new passions in photography and social work.

Hazzard, a long-time resident of the punk-rock skate scene, says it all began when he was living in San Diego, chasing the California lifestyle.

“I was in San Diego and I was a manager at this New York-style pizzeria downtown,” he said. “I crouched down to take a pizza out of the oven and when I came up, I turned and just felt it pop. I swear I could hear it pop. Probably not, but I felt it, and on the inside of my knee, it tore somehow.”

“I figured it would heal up in about a week or so, so I was still working on it for a while. Then when it didn’t heal, I got the MRI done, and that’s when it all kind of strung together.”

Hazzard had to have surgery for the torn cartilage in his knee. It wasn’t until he started physical therapy that they realized there was a bigger problem at hand.

“My physical therapist was noticing some things like my legs would shake when she moved them a certain way,” Hazzard explained. “She told me to go to see a doctor ‘like, tomorrow,’ she said, ‘it’s that important.’”

“It turns out that the C6 [vertebrae] in my neck had a bulging disc that was swelling out and in, on the inside pinching the spinal cord. So, I had a surgery to take the disc out and fuse the spine. But the damage was done to the nerves.”

The neck injury didn't necessarily come as a surprise to Hazzard. Active his whole life, he spent a lot of time skateboarding and snowboarding, had played football throughout his time in school, and worked in construction painting houses in Minneapolis.

“It's weird,” Hazzard confessed. “There were some things I knew, like I was feeling tingling in my hands, but when you work with your hands like that, you're pretty much expected to get carpal tunnel,” he explained. “That's what I thought it was. And I noticed I was having sore legs, but I was used to being on my feet for eight or 10 hours a day.”

“When I asked about the surgery, they said ‘Well you could be completely healed, partially healed, paralyzed or dead,’” he added. “So, you just kind of have to put your faith in the doctor. The doctor said I could have tripped out on the sidewalk and I could have been paralyzed.”

Though hard to explain, Hazzard said he has “all-over pain” that affects the whole body after he underwent surgery because of how high up the bulging disc was.

“It didn't heal anything, but it did stop the progression,” Hazzard explained. “Over the years—almost 10 years—there are things I can tell are getting worse as it goes along, but it isn't anything that would put me in a wheelchair tomorrow.” Though perhaps not the full recovery he was hoping for, he recognizes how bad the outcome could have been and says, “I'm happy for what I do have.”

And these are the driving forces that keep Hazzard going—stubborn resolve, a need for independence, and certainly true grit.

“The doctors were saying I’d pretty much have to use a walker, and they gave me one when I left the hospital,” Hazzard said. “A few weeks after being at home, I threw it in the recycling bin and I’ve been using a cane.”

For him, the cane symbolizes the ability to choose his own freedom.

“I want to be as independent and use as little as possible,” he said firmly. “Just kind of telling them I’m going to do more and use as little assistance as possible. And I do everything on my own—nothing holds me back as much, everything just takes a little bit longer.”

“You just have to keep going, you know? People ask me about it and it’s like, well, I could be mad or sad or stay at home and it’s not going to change anything. You’ve got to keep going and adjust—it’s just about adjusting and learning to do things different ways.”

This is how he ended up going back to school—with the nerve injury making it difficult for him to go back to work, he “decided to use it as an opportunity” and start taking classes at Kirkwood, and he’s since managed to evolve new hobbies to an old, tried-and-true lifestyle.

A photography class jumpstarted a hobby of film photography and vintage camera collecting, and he finds himself taking a lot of pictures at the skate park. Though he didn’t know about the social work major at first, one of the last classes he took there focused on substance abuse, and something seemed to click.

Hazzard says that the more he finds out about social work, the more excited he is to go into it. He’s considering using his degree for outreach with “the people who fall through the cracks.”

“I got into skateboarding when I was pretty young, and at that same time I got into punk-rock, and so I’ve been into that stuff my whole life,” Hazzard said. “I’m thinking of some kind of outreach working with people in that scene—there’s definitely substance abuse issues.”

“And I could be on their level and not be condescending, you know? I think it’s a group that doesn’t get as much attention that I could help with. The more I learn about it, the more I think of different things to do.”

And he may have found a good start with his volunteer work at Recovery Church, an organization that was recommended to him by his sister, who has also volunteered there.

“I’ve been working with Recovery Church on Friday nights,” Hazzard said. “The guys who run it are Christian bikers, and they hang out at the skate park—they think skaters are the coolest people! So that was pretty interesting, to go to some place I didn’t think I’d have that much of a connection, and they’re friends with all my friends.”

“Now I’m volunteering and observing there, because, like I was telling my sister, this is pretty much exactly what I want to do.”