



National Disabled Veterans

Winter Sports Clinic

Skier Profile

Shawn O'Neill – Keep Your Head Up and Move Forward!

Shawn O'Neill, of Chagrin Falls, Ohio, joined the Air Force in 2001 because he wanted to better his life. “My father was in the military and so was my grandfather,” he explained. “It’s a military family.”

Serving as a loadmaster in charge of “loading everything from cargo to people” aboard the C130 cargo planes, O'Neill traveled extensively. “I was all over,” he said. “Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa, Turkey – I went just about everywhere.” After leaving active duty in 2005, O'Neill, who is now 26, continued to serve his country in the Reserves, although he is currently on medical leave awaiting discharge.

The need for medical leave came about after a devastating dirt bike accident near his Ohio home on December 6, 2006. He was on leave from Germany at the time, and took the opportunity to ride some dirt bikes with friends, an activity he had always enjoyed. “I came up short on a jump,” O'Neill said. The injury was severe, severing his spinal cord, breaking his jaw, and leaving him a paraplegic. “I went to the hospital, where they did a spinal fusion and three surgeries on my jaw. I had a hard time accepting what had happened. Other than my immediate family, I didn't want to see anyone.”

After months of rehabilitation, including physical therapy and recreation therapy at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Cleveland, O'Neill began the long process of re-learning how to do things, or finding new ways to do them differently. With leg braces, he can now stand, although he uses a wheelchair for everyday mobility. Deciding that he needed to get active again, he started playing wheelchair basketball with the Cleveland Cavaliers, a local wheelchair basketball team. “That is so much fun,” he says now. “That really got my attitude turned around. It was so good to be active again and around other guys dealing with the same things. One of my best experiences since my injury is being on the team.” Since his injury, he has also gone kayaking and adaptive waterskiing, another sport that's given him great pleasure.

A fellow Cavalier told him about the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, and his VA recreation therapist also said it would provide a good opportunity to see what other things he could do. O'Neil signed up. “They talked me into it,” he said. “I used to race snowboards for about five years, so I tried mono-skiing earlier this year with a local adaptive ski club and found out it was a lot of fun. I want to get really good at it and hope I can learn a lot more at the Clinic in Colorado. I look forward to trying all of the activities – mono-skiing and also snowmobiling and the shooting sports like air guns, since I was an expert marksman in the service. I want to try it all – and meet a lot of the other veterans while I'm at it.”

In the 16 months since he was injured, Shawn O'Neill has decided to get active again and continue to move forward. “It really proves that there are tons of things out there that you can still do – really, everything you did before. You just need to keep on doing them. Keep your head up and move forward. Just always keep moving forward.”

Miracles on a Mountainside!



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Disabled American Veterans