

# Wheelin' Hope

## Aaron Sears

*A Hero in Richmond Hill*

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When Aaron Sears and his wife, Karen, finally made the decision to schedule Aaron's spine surgery, on February 7, 2007, it was because they feared that, if they didn't, Aaron's ability to walk might be affected for the rest of his life. They knew the surgery would be a serious one but were reassured that, if all went as planned, Aaron would be back to work in six weeks and back to all duties in six months. They never imagined that, after that day, nothing would ever be the same.

Aaron enlisted in the infantry just after graduating from high school, in 1989, where his leadership capabilities were quickly acknowledged. He was selected to be a squad leader and graduated fast track from basic training. Aaron had found his calling and was proud to be serving his country as he had always dreamed to do. At 19 years old, shortly after graduating from basic training, Aaron was training for an upcoming mission and sustained an injury to his spine. His love for and commitment to the Army overshadowed his ongoing nagging pain and he continued his duties. In 1992, Aaron decided to take advantage of an opportunity to continue his education at the recommendation of his immediate supervisors who recognized his potential.

Aaron and Karen met through mutual friends in Sacramento, California, fell in love and married June 6, 1993. Aaron continued to display his characteristic drive and enthusiasm for life. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in nursing from the University of Missouri in St. Louis, while also serving as a Battalion Commander in ROTC. At the same time, he was settling into his life as a newly-wed.

Aaron re-entered the Army as an officer, in 1998, and worked as an RN in Level 1 Trauma, helping others in their time of need. Aaron's back was beginning to cause him more frequent pain, but his greatest



*Karen and Aaron Sears with Lane.*

fear was being medically boarded from the job he loved so much. The MRI of his spine revealed a narrowing of the spinal canal around his spinal cord, a condition that rarely occurs at such a young age, unless there is a history of injury to the spine and scar tissue develops. Aaron insisted that he would only take anti-inflammatory medications for pain and would continue his duties as assigned.

Aaron deployed to Kuwait in 2003, where he proudly worked on the front lines as an RN caring for fellow injured troops. "Aaron has always thrived on giving back and helping others; he has always been very independent," says his wife Karen. In May of 2006, Aaron and Karen moved to Richmond Hill. Aaron was stationed at Fort Stewart

and worked at Winn Army Community Hospital. That same year, he volunteered and was scheduled to deploy in March of 2007. He was unable to do so, however, due to the progression of his symptoms: muscle spasms in his legs and loss of control of his bladder function related to the pressure on his spinal cord. Two weeks before Aaron was scheduled to deploy, he and Karen, at the recommendation of his neurosurgeon, made the difficult decision for him to undergo spinal surgery to prevent potential paralysis.

At 11:45 a.m. on the day of surgery, Karen was told the surgeon wanted to speak to her. Aaron was out of surgery but could not move his legs. At this point, it was uncertain whether it was due to swelling or whether this would be a permanent loss. Karen responded, "That's alright. I am a military spouse and we will get through this." Karen was in shock, she recalls, "I had no idea what lay ahead." It was shortly after that, when Karen saw Aaron, that she realized everything was far from alright. The pain they had both hoped Aaron's surgery would alleviate had increased to an excruciating level from the middle of his torso throughout both legs, neither of which he could move.

Aaron spent the next eight weeks in rehab at the hospital, before being discharged home and then, as Karen describes it, "the journey began." She recalls the past four years as "A roller coaster of emotions, frustration and even anger. We are still learning what our new normal is and how the dynamics between us have changed." Karen describes learning to be more patient and appreciating the present as opposed to taking each other for granted. "I am amazed every day by watching the young man that I married at 21, who has grown into this strong, generous, determined and forgiving man," she says.

Aaron is committed to his success and has refused to give up hope. He has been diligent in his daily routines, spending at least two hours a day on the activities of daily living. He continues to do rehab at

home despite being told by his therapists that his attempts were futile, a waste of time and would just give him false hope.

Karen's pride for who her husband is and what he has accomplished is evident. "Over the past four years, Aaron has been presented with a quilt, gone deer hunting with other disabled Soldiers, invited to sign the Army Community Covenant and speak at the ceremony, written in *Wheelin' Sportsman*, earned a service dog from Patriot Paws in Texas and trained there for two weeks to receive his dog, Lane, begun hand-cycling and, most recently, was invited to be on the Saving America's Mustangs float in the Rose Bowl Parade. While doing

all this, he has continued to lift weights for his upper body and swim to try and regain movement. He has never let go of the desire and belief that he will walk again. Some people may think this is foolish, but I call him determined and inspiring. I see it everyday, and I believe that we have a hero in Richmond Hill who goes about unnoticed by many, because Aaron is not one to purposely draw attention to himself. Four years ago, I didn't think I could live this life, but now I know that, with Aaron by my side, we *can* live this life, and I'm proud to live it with him."

Despite the odds and what doctors and therapists told him was impossible, Aaron has not only regained some movement but is now able to

walk about 200 feet with the assistance of a walker, braces on his legs and using a lot of upper body strength. Aaron's medical team is at the VA Spinal Cord Injury Unit in Augusta, Georgia. Aaron and Karen are saddened at the thought of leaving their beloved Richmond Hill community that has embraced, encouraged and helped them through some of the toughest years of their lives but know it is the right decision for Aaron to have the access he needs to care. He believes everything happens for a reason and chooses to focus on those who have helped him rather than those who haven't. I agree with Karen, Aaron's determination is truly inspiring, and together they are unstoppable. \*



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