

Handcycler Dave Briggs credits River Bank Run sponsor for helping rebuild his life after accident

by Howie Beardsley | The Grand Rapids Press

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Katy Batdorff |

The Grand Rapids Press Dave Briggs takes a ride with his daughters, Ellie, 8, left, and Cori, 4. The girls will cheer him on Saturday when he competes in the Fifth Third River Bank Run's 25-kilometer wheelchair division.

GRAND RAPIDS -- The date was April 29, 2000, and Dave Briggs was riding dirt bikes with friends on his Belmont farm.

But the joy ride turned tragic for the 40-year-old Grand Rapids man.

"I hit a rock or stump, and the bike stayed there while I flew about 80 feet, landed headfirst and broke my helmet in half," Briggs said. "I was lying on my back and could feel my hands. But when I tried to feel my stomach and legs, I couldn't feel anything. It was surreal."

It also was very real.

Briggs remembers the ambulance ride to the hospital. But, even though he was conscious and talking, Briggs doesn't remember anything else for the next 10 days. That included the doctors who told him he had broken his neck at the C2 level, severed his spinal cord

at the C4 level, broken his sternum and snapped all the ribs off the right side of his backbone.

"In short, I no longer have feeling from just above my nipple line down," Briggs said. "After finally coming out of that 10-day fog, I was sent to Mary Free Bed (Rehabilitation Hospital) to spend the next three months recuperating, while constantly asking myself, 'What in the world am I going to do with my life now? I can't afford this. This is incredible.' I was a wreck.

"I figured I'd spend my remaining days making license plates or gluing macaroni on paper plates."

Within a year of his life-changing mishap, Briggs' oldest daughter, Ellie, was born while he listened to the delivery through a speaker set up in his Mary Free Bed room. A house the family was building was destroyed by fire, and he was unable to continue working as a delivery driver and sorter for United Parcel Service. And he went through a divorce.

But through it all, the 1987 graduate of Northview High School never lost hope, thanks, in large part, to Mary Free Bed.

The Mary Free Bed Guild is sponsoring the Fifth Third River Bank Run's 25-kilometer wheelchair division Saturday for the 20th consecutive year.

That division will feature world-class competitors Saul Mendoza and Krige Schabort. It also includes Mary Free Bed's 3-year-old 25K handcycle race, which Briggs will compete in for the third time.

"When I first got to Mary Free Bed, I had no desire to live, let alone try to live the way I was," Briggs said. "I couldn't see what the place was ever going to do for me. I even remember my freshman year at Northview, when we didn't win a game in football. The joke was we couldn't beat a team from Mary Free Bed. We all thought that was funny.

"People don't realize what a jewel we have here in Grand Rapids with Mary Free Bed."

Now, Briggs is busy with Ellie and his second daughter, Cori, 4. He also has a part-time night job at UPS as a clerk and is a Teamster steward for the company.

"UPS, like Mary Free Bed, has been incredible to me," Briggs said. "My life has changed, but I have a life while still being a part of my two daughters' lives. I'm still able to be athletic.

"The best part for me is being able to bike as a handcycler. It's great recreation and therapy for me, and it's definitely something I enjoy with my kids -- my angels."