

EXPOSURE



A LIFE RECOVERED

How one man lost an arm, but gained a life

Story by [Fresno State](#)

September 13th, 2019

In 2012, William Schmahl woke up in a hospital bed with no recollection of who he was. At 23 years old, he looked his parents in the eye and asked, “Who are you?”

“I had a brain injury, a pretty severe one,” William says. “The loss of identity was terrifying.”

William was hit by a car while driving a motorcycle. The car sent him swerving into a telephone pole. All of the bones in his upper right torso were broken. All of his organs were damaged — from lacerations on his liver and kidney to losing the use of his right lung.

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His right arm was paralyzed and he suffered from severe traumatic brain injury, which caused memory loss.

“I didn’t know my family. It was a complete loss of identity,” William says.

A life recovered



A WEIGHT OFF HIS SHOULDERS

William underwent 19 surgeries after his accident. Like many individuals who endure a traumatic injury, William suffered from depression during the recovery process.

During years of recovery, William recalls being “essentially immobile” at his parents’ house. Having a paralyzed limb meant he faced challenges with simple day-to-day activities like putting on a belt. William also endured chronic pain that was made worse by his paralyzed arm, which was “dead weight” that triggered severe nerve pain.

“I was faced with obstacles and I asked, ‘How do I overcome this?’” William says. “It really is the tiny parts of life that you take for granted when you have two limbs to use.”

William says his parents helped him overcome his depression, along with his siblings’ support and therapy with a qualified psychologist. He did not recover memories of his life before the

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“I wholly recognize that I am an incredibly privileged individual,” William says. “I’m privileged to have the parents I have. My parents — their willingness to put in the time with me and their willingness to help find me a really qualified psychologist.”

Three years after his accident, William made a life-changing decision: to amputate his paralyzed right arm.

“When you have a paralyzed limb, you’re essentially an amputee — except you have this thing that’s hanging off of you, that’s weighing you down,” he says. “For me, life didn’t really start until after I got it removed.”



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EMPATHETIC EXPERIENCES

With no right arm weighing him down, William felt free to achieve his goals. William's psychologist inspired him to pursue a career in helping others.

At Fresno State, William is a student in the master's program in marriage, child and family counseling. His goal is to work with individuals with disabilities, particularly those who are newly-disabled, because he recognizes the trauma of acquiring a disability, the emotional process of recovery and the effect it has on a person's family or support system.

"Fresno State to me, it really does mean family," William says. "I've developed a lot of relationships here. It's giving me that outsider's perspective into my own world, my own culture, and it's given me an insider's perspective into the lives of people who are less privileged and grow up in more difficult socioeconomic areas."

As a part of the master's program, William works as a trainee at Fresno Family Counseling Center. The center provides affordable, high-quality counseling services to residents of Fresno County and the surrounding area, while providing hands-on training to graduate students.

The center provides nearly 10,000 therapy sessions per year in both English and Spanish,

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poverty level. At the same time, graduate students like William gain hands-on experience providing services to clients while working under the supervision of licensed professionals.

“One of our core goals is bringing mental health services to the people,” says Dr. Mandy Greaves, assistant professor in the Department of Counselor Education and Rehabilitation. She adds:

“One of the great things about Will is that he's never let a challenge set him back. And I think he's a really good example for other people who have disabilities or challenges, whether it be physical or mental, to show them that they can do different things, that they don't have to be stuck in the role that society puts them in.”



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→ **Did you know? Graduate students at Fresno Family Counseling Center provide nearly 10,000 low-cost therapy sessions to local residents per year.**

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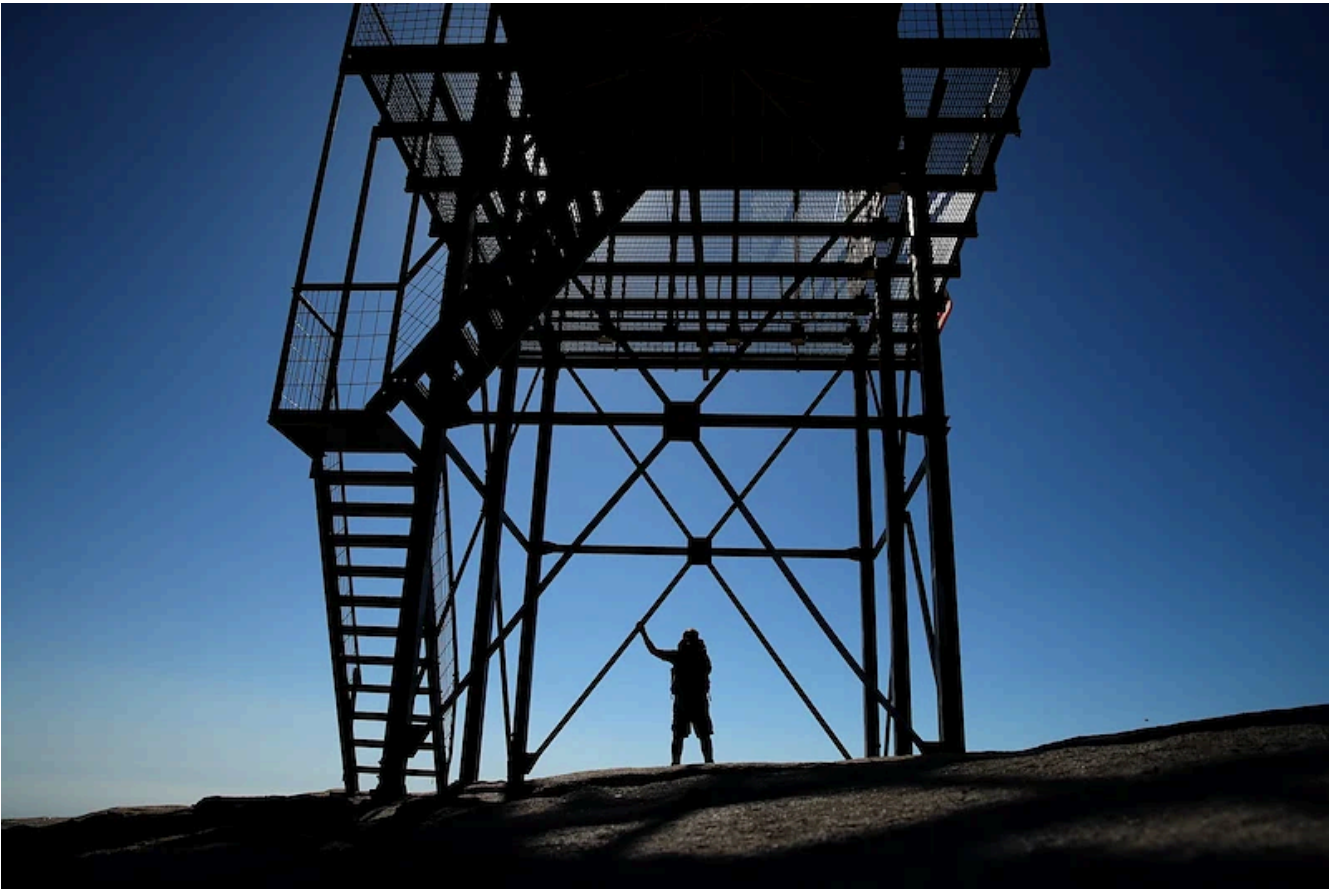
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TREKKING FORWARD

While amputating his paralyzed arm helped William feel free, chronic pain is still something he battles with on a daily basis. He says he wakes up in pain, and the pain steadily increases throughout the day. William says he does not want to be reliant on opiate-based medications, which are chronically addictive.

So instead of taking medicine, William hikes.

“I only feel like someone who’s not in pain when I’m hiking,” William says. “The exertion that I put myself through releases a lot of endorphins and dopamine, which is essentially nature’s painkiller.”

Hiking is a form of self-care for William — a chance for him to take time for himself so that he can continue to be empathetic and effective with his clients at Fresno Family Counseling Center. He is able to take advantage of Fresno State’s central location, with three national parks within driving distance, and [take photographs of his hiking adventures](#).

“It’s a challenge for me to go out and do these things. My injury was significant,” William admits. “Hiking started out as a challenge to see how far I can push myself, but slowly over time, it became a centering experience.”

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When William is hiking, he feels like himself.

“While I had a life taken from me, I've gained a new life,” he says. “I've gained a new set of tools. I've gained a new perspective on challenges and obstacles, and how to overcome those.”



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Footnote: *Photos by Cary Edmondson, Story by Esra Hashem, Video by Chris Samaro — University Brand Strategy and Marketing*

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