
More than a milestone

Paralyzed man
savors life, family
and LMC graduation

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BENTON TOWNSHIP —
When you feel a higher purpose guiding your every move nothing will stand in the way of achieving whatever goals you've set out for yourself.

That's how the world appears to Benton Harbor resident Tony Andrews, who's spent 25 years as a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down – but one who'll graduate today with an

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associate's degree in general studies from Lake Michigan College.

Asked how it feels to reach his educational dream, Tony replied, "The only thing I can say (is), 'explosive.' You know, it's just truly been a blessing to make it."

Tony and his wife, Mary, also cite a verse from Philippians 4:13 that's sustained them since his life changed so drastically 25 years ago: "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."

He'll join 473 students receiving 488 degrees or certificates during the college's 67th annual commencement ceremony, which is scheduled for 2 p.m. today in the Mendel Center.

The couple first met at Hughes Plastics, where they both worked at the time.

I would sneak around, hide behind the machines," Tony said, laughing.

"I told my best friend — who was 70-some years old — 'I'm gonna marry her,' and he said, 'No, you're not. You don't even know that woman.' One day, she got sick at work, and that was my cue. Two or three months later, we started dating."

Little by little, they started talking, and they found a connection with each other.

"I wasn't an easy catch," Mary said, laughing. "It was a series of moments — he was a perfect gentleman. He'd know there was a time to leave, and he left."

The couple's world changed forever Aug. 13, 1989, when Tony fell out of a tree on the morning of his wedding day.

Tony, who had his own tree-trimming business, thought he'd just hurry through his latest job, go home and get ready for the big day.

Just then, the branch that he was standing on suddenly broke, sending him tumbling 6 feet to the ground.

"I was trying to do a job quick because I was running late for everything. I didn't put my safety gear on. I went up the tree, drop started my chain saw, and fell backwards," he recalled.

In one stroke, Tony landed on his head, "and popped my spinal cord," he said. "I tried to get up. I tried to move, and I was like, 'Oh, man, this is serious.' There wasn't nothing moving."

Mary was at home, getting herself ready, when the news came.

"When they called, me and his mom rushed to the hospital. We called some of the family members, and we all rushed to the hospital," she recalled.

Today, Tony — who turns 50 on July 1 — watches his life unfold from a motorized wheelchair, though he's found plenty of ways to bring the world to him.

A text messaging device is attached to his right wrist, which helps him send emails, and call friends. To enter numbers and letters onto the message pad, he holds a stick in his teeth, which he also uses to paint portraits and landscapes.

Since his accident, Tony can move his shoulders, and pull his hands up somewhat. He proudly describes himself as "verbally independent," even if total mobility is only a dream.

His wheelchair also tilts backwards into a bed, "which gives some pressure relief," he said.

The couple's wedding plans had to wait for about a year, as Tony underwent extensive physical therapy at Mary Free Bed Hospital, in Grand Rapids. The process only deepened their relationship, as they rallied around each other.

When not helping her husband, Mary also cared for Tony's mother, Lois Andrews. Lois died of cancer after watching her son go through his physical therapy.

No matter how difficult his situation felt, however, Tony maintains that he nev-



Contributed photo

Tony and Mary Andrews on their wedding day, after a tree-trimming accident left him paralyzed from the neck down. Tony graduates today from Lake Michigan College.

er got angry about what happened. He simply found a different focus.

"I was kind of hard-headed in life," Tony said. "I said (after the fall), 'Lord, have Thy way — I commit myself to Thee.' After that (incident), that's all it was. I just kept smiling."

Besides their Christian faith, Tony and Mary also credit his doctors with giving him the motivation to make it through his therapy, as well as adjust to the reality of his situation.

"One thing I can say about all the doctors that Tony had ... they were God sent, Christian doctors, all the way," she said.

That motivation also proved helpful after Tony realized he had to complete his physical therapy well enough, so that he could return home, as Mary recalled.

"He never did stop smiling. He made peace with God, and he kept smiling," she said.

After his accident, education and art assumed a greater importance in Tony's life, as well as motivational speaking — which he's done

since 1997 — and he's working on an inspirational autobiography.

He hopes to sell his art, once he feels ready for the challenge.

Tony and Mary, who's 53, have raised four children during their 25-year marriage.

"That's where LMC came into play — being paralyzed, you have a lot of time on your hands," Tony said. "But I knew that God gave me a purpose — and then, he started taking me to another level."

In the end, love and faith are the building blocks that make life matter, Tony and Mary said.

"He uplifts me, a lot of times," Mary said of their relationship. "He uplifts me, and I uplift him. That's how our marriage has lasted this long."

"When you've got someone that loves you, you've got family life ... how can say that you're not blessed, when you're at home, and you've got family that loves you?"

Tony agrees. "How can I be bitter? It's a blessing to be loved."