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Forward Thinking

After recovering from a paralyzing fall, Sam Porritt '84 launched a foundation to help others with debilitating conditions and limited health insurance to get the rehabilitation therapy they need.

Story by PAM WINDSOR



Along with pride and humility, Sam Porritt '84 felt a sense of coming full circle as he rose to receive an honorary degree at IWU's May Commencement. He was being honored by the University he credits with laying a foundation for his entire adult life. More than that, he was standing and walking — things he feared he might never do again after a freak accident that happened six years ago had left him paralyzed.

"It's one of those life experiences you never expect and certainly something you'll never forget," Porritt remarked after receiving the honorary degree for his work with Falling Forward, an organization that helps people with debilitating medical conditions get rehabilitation they cannot afford on their own. It fills a surprising gap in medical insurance Porritt discovered only after he was severely injured while on vacation in Europe in August of 2011.

"I had been successful in my career, my wife and I had the ability to travel, and we were on a trip to Italy, staying in this beautiful private home," he recalls. "I was standing near the edge of a wall and was so wrapped up in taking a photo with my phone, I moved in the wrong direction, lost my balance and fell off a 15-foot wall."

His life changed in an instant. He suffered a spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed from the waist down. Porritt spent the next two and a half weeks in a hospital in Italy before he could return to the U.S. He spent another five weeks in a Kansas City hospital.

Mark Ballard '83, Porritt's close friend from the days at IWU, recalls when he first heard about the accident.

"I remember getting a text from Sam once he was able to do something like that with some sketchy details and that he would be sent home from the hospital in Kansas City on whatever date that might be. So I and a couple of other friends decided to make a road trip from Central Illinois to Lawrence [Kansas] to check on him and make sure he was doing okay."

They arrived to find Porritt in rough shape.

"He was in a wheelchair," Ballard says. "And he was paralyzed."

After the initial shock of learning he couldn't walk, Porritt says he started focusing on what needed to be done. "Somewhere deep inside of me I thought, I'm 48 years old, I have a whole lot of life left to live. I'm not giving up."

He began fighting his way back, determined to do whatever it would take to walk again. It would mean months, even years, of hard work and rehabilitation. He soon discovered he had more of a chance to succeed because he had a unique insurance policy that allowed him to have whatever therapy necessary.

"I had the ability to fight because of this unknown benefit in my insurance that said rehab would continue as long as my body was recovering."

He realized others didn't have that same coverage.

"People around me who had suffered spinal cord injuries, brain injuries, and strokes were not given that same opportunity because their insurance had this thing called a 'therapy cap.' Ninety-nine percent of insurance policies have a therapy cap. ... We were the lucky one percent. It was almost like I won the lottery."

Porritt spent the next two years going through daily physical therapy, eventually learning to walk again with the help of a cane. He estimates his total number of rehab visits between 400 and 500, noting that most people — those with caps — are allowed only 30. He became determined to help and formed the Falling Forward Foundation, a 501(c) nonprofit organization that assists people with catastrophic injuries whose recoveries are limited due to insurance caps.

He asked Ballard to serve as Falling Forward's treasurer. So far, the organization — which now operates in Kansas, Missouri, Colorado, and Illinois — has helped 73 people get the therapy they need.

A Change of Plans

Porritt points to his longstanding friendship with Ballard and others as one of the many benefits of attending Illinois Wesleyan some three decades ago. Over the years Porritt has returned to campus for Homecoming and other visits and expressed gratitude for the strong educational foundation he received by funding a student scholarship and regularly contributing to the Wesleyan Fund.

One of his most vivid college memories involves a time he was set back on course when he wasn't so sure about his future.

During most of his four years at IWU, the Peoria, Ill., native planned to become an accountant. It wasn't until he was almost ready to graduate that he changed his mind.

"I was an accounting major and senior year decided I didn't want to pursue a career in accounting," Porritt recalls. "And it ruffled the feathers of some of the faculty."

Uncertain of what to do next, Porritt got some advice from an unexpected source. He says what happened then could only have happened at a small, close-knit school like Illinois Wesleyan. He got a call informing him the president of IWU wanted to meet with him.

"I'm thinking, oh no, I'm going to get a talking to because I decided at the last minute not to pursue my accounting degree," he remembers, referring to his meeting with then President Robert S. Eckley. "What did he talk to me about? He wanted to talk to me about my options."

Eckley recommended Porritt pursue his MBA, telling him it would broaden his expertise, expose him to other aspects of business, and give him the tools needed to decide on the proper career path.

"He was absolutely right, so that's exactly what I did. But how many schools would have had that happen, where the president of the university pulls a student in to give them a one-on-one coaching session? Wow."

As Porritt headed off to the University of Chicago with its highly competitive program, he admits he felt he might be slightly out of his league.

"I remember vividly my first week meeting all of my classmates, and they're all from Ivy League schools, and I'm feeling so intimidated because I'm from little Illinois Wesleyan."

He soon discovered he was more prepared than he imagined.

"I did really well in my classes the first semester, far better than some of my Ivy League peers. It goes to show Wesleyan just prepared me really, really well. The liberal arts education there really prepares you to think critically, to be able to analyze things and make decisions. That basis really prepared me well for both graduate school and my career after that."

After getting his MBA, he began a career in marketing. Since then he's worked for advertising agencies and for corporations like Payless ShoeSource. He's done well in his chosen field over the years and says that there are times he's had a lot of fun doing it.

"One of my little claims to fame from my marketing career long ago," he chuckles, "was in 1986, when I was fresh out of graduate school, I was part of the team that gave birth to 'Chester Cheetah' for Cheetos."

While at that same Chicago ad agency, Porritt also hired actress Cameron Diaz for her first on-camera experience — a TV commercial for Salon Selectives hair products. The next year she would go on to co-star with Jim Carrey in *The Mask*.

Although he's proud of his marketing career, Porritt gets a deeper satisfaction talking about the people who have been helped through Falling Forward. Among them is Ed Corporal, who was a high school basketball and volleyball coach when he suffered a stroke in 2013. It left him paralyzed along his entire left side. As an athlete, Corporal worked hard to recover but was still in a wheelchair when he was told he'd used all of the rehab sessions allowed by his insurance.

"I wasn't even close to walking when my insurance ran out," Corporal says.

A hospital therapist told Corporal about Falling Forward. He applied and returned to therapy, continuing rehab for the next three years. Today he's back doing everything he did before, including coaching.

"I'm driving, running, back to coaching full-time. I'm also helping with the Kansas University basketball team. Falling Forward really helped me get to where I am now."

Porritt's organization also stepped in to help Jason Greene, who suffered a traumatic brain injury after a cycling accident. He lost his memory, as well as the ability to walk, speak, and eat on his own. Greene was in the early stages of his recovery, still needing extensive rehab including speech therapy, when his wife, Mary, learned his access to all of that was severely limited.

"The health care advocate said you're going to have 30 visits of therapy. Thirty visits, that's all he gets?" she recalls asking. She worried how to maximize those visits in a way that could best help her husband. "The brain takes years to heal. How can insurance say if you have therapy it's going to take 30 visits? ... It's totally subjective. I would say it's up to the doctor to decide."

Thanks to Falling Forward, Jason continues to heal. He's back at work and marking victories with his progress every day.

Facing a Bigger Problem

Porritt says that while his organization has helped a number of people, so many others have been left behind.

"I'm really proud of what we're doing, but here's the harsh reality: We've helped 73 people, but in the time we helped those people there's probably been 73,000 more who also needed help."

He notes that most people aren't aware of the therapy caps in their insurance until it's too late. So, while Falling Forward raises money to cover rehab for those who need it, the foundation also works to raise awareness and change the law. Porritt and members of the foundation, including Ballard, have traveled to Washington, D.C. to lobby Congress.



Porritt and foundation board members during the SkyRise Chicago event in 2015.

"Sam and I have been to Washington and spoken with some of the elected officials about the rehab caps on Medicare, Medicaid, and how the insurance companies tend to follow the government," Ballard explains. He says he and Porritt hope to convince lawmakers to change rules "based on evidence of the success of letting rehab take its course until the natural end where people get back to normal life. Ultimately, it would be significantly better financially for the country, rather than cutting people off and having them be dependent on the government and society for the rest of their lives."

Those trips to D.C. — including meetings with former Illinois Senator Mark Kirk, whose 2012 stroke provided firsthand insights — have succeeded in drawing more attention to the cause.

Six years after his accident, Porritt now sees the positive way it redirected his life.

"While this terrible thing happened to me, I got incredible medical care, had this gift of insurance that almost no one else gets, and was exposed to an issue I'd never heard of before. It's now become kind of my life's purpose," he explains.

"I'm proud of my marketing career, but I feel like my life is much more meaningful than back when I was selling Cheetos or Payless shoes, or all those things. What I'm doing now is truly changing people's lives."