

“Impressively goofy.” That’s how Chris Schechner describes himself, and there is plenty of evidence to support that. It’s evidence to Schechner’s spirit that flies free in spite of a body imprisoned by quadriplegia.

On July 9, 1971, Schechner was in between his sophomore and junior years at Stephen F. Austin State University. He was doing hard physical labor in a job that allowed him to be outdoors and paid better than most summer jobs. After one particularly hot day he and a friend went swimming. Schechner dove in. Though he doesn’t remember any pain, he says he was instantly aware that something was very wrong. Unable to move, his friend pulled him from the water and called an ambulance. At the hospital, X-rays revealed a broken neck. Rather than going back to college in the fall, Schechner spent six months in the hospital in recovery and rehabilitation.

Thirty-five years later Schechner says, surprisingly, “In retrospect, it’s probably the best thing that’s happened to me.” Not that life is easy. The simplest acts are now, still difficult, painstaking and time-consuming. The process of getting ready for the day involves transferring out of bed into his wheelchair, transferring from that chair into a shower chair, then back again. Once the hygiene routine is complete, he transfers from his wheelchair back into bed where he expends a great deal of energy during the process of dressing. Next, Schechner heads for the studio in his home and begins his workday.

Rather than giving up on his dream of becoming a graphic artist, Schechner completed his degree, earning a bachelor of fine arts. He is now an art director, coming up with concepts for projects, hiring the appropriate illustrator(s) to complete the work and supervising the layout design to completion. The evidence of Schechner’s talents as a cartoonist and sculptor adorn his studio. Cartoon self-portraits are prevalent, in which he never draws himself in a wheelchair because as he says, offering profound insight into himself and his spirit, “I am not disabled. It’s only my body in the wheelchair.” There are also colorful pictures of bizarre, obviously friendly monsters in residence. One person who received one such “monster family portrait” as a gift, grins when she says, “I love it. It makes me smile every time I look at it.” And that, Schechner says, is the point.

One of his favorite quotes is from Walt Kelly, “Don’t take life so serious. It ain’t no how permanent.” That particular attitude is helping Schechner face his most recent challenge: the realization that his life expectancy may very well be limited. As he says, “Some days I feel I’m living on borrowed time.” He is part of the first generation of those with spinal cord injuries to live more than just a short time after their accidents.

One of the best lessons gained from his disability is compassion and empathy for others, as well as the ability to discern whether they need a shoulder on which to cry or relief through laughter. He is, as he says, “impressively goofy.” When asked what one thing he would want people to get from reading his story he responded, “That I’m available for dinner most nights of the week.”