

Walking to get his diploma was important enough to take a chance for Daniel Lowe

By [Justin George](#), Times Staff Writer

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ST. PETERSBURG — Last fall, Daniel Lowe chose to have his hip broken and refastened with six pins to correct the crookedness that came with cerebral palsy. He screamed as nurses bent his knee to his chest during recovery.

The idea was to walk as normally as possible. Shriners's Hospital in Tampa had done the surgery for free, but Daniel would have to wait a few months to get the physical therapy he needed on his legs.

Daniel is 18. He's a senior at Center Academy, a prep school that focuses on building self-esteem and motivation.

After the surgery, he lost some of his drive. Depressed that he couldn't walk well, he started skipping school and sleeping longer than he should. His mother thought a gym might help, so Daniel crutched into Anytime Fitness and asked a trainer for a couple of free lessons.

He said he had a goal: to walk across the stage in May and get his diploma standing up.

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Daniel weighed only 2 pounds, 6 ounces at birth, but he was feisty, breathing without a ventilator by his second day. When he was 6, he scratched and clawed at the doctors who cut into his balled-up leg muscles and tendons and put his legs in casts. And yet he made dramatic developmental leaps.

"It had to be in his own time," his mother, Kim Kaye, said.

At 7, he left his four-prong cane in the hall and stumbled into class. It was the first time he ever walked on his own. But days later, he tripped and put his arm through a window, severing an artery.



[CHRIS ZUPPA | Times]

Daniel Lowe walks across the stage Saturday at the St. Petersburg Yacht Club after receiving his diploma from Center Academy. His stepfather, Richard Kaye, greets him at the end of the stage.

Momentum was both enemy and ally because Daniel was like a bicycle that needs to move to stay upright. Today, his forearms are rubbed ragged from tumbles.

As he grew, his left foot dragged worse than ever. His mother couldn't imagine him volunteering for the agonizing surgery that would correct the problem, but he asked for it last year while she cooked him breakfast.

What did walking mean to him? "That I could do pretty much whatever I wanted."

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Doug Patton, the trainer, had worked with a lot of clients, but never one like Daniel.

Patton, 41, is coiled and compact, with a strong chin and a pit bull tattooed on his calf. Daniel inspired him so he agreed to help him for free. At their first workout, Patton returned from a break to find Daniel on the phone with his mother. Daniel said he felt his pulse racing in his arm, a sign of a seizure.

Patton held Daniel against a weight bench. The boy grabbed his hand and passed out. His mother carried him home.

Daniel returned to the gym two days later. Patton put him through cable presses and shoulder lifts and curls, often guiding Daniel's disabled left arm like an archer aiming at a target. As graduation approached, Daniel asked to go from three sessions a week to four.

Patton had a name for Daniel: "The One."

"u go day by day untill u get 2 where u wwna b," Daniel wrote on his Facebook page.

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Saturday was graduation at the St. Petersburg Yacht Club. "My heart's beating," Daniel told a teacher. "I'm so scared of tripping."

What if the tassel got in his eyes? What if his left hand couldn't grab the diploma? His new shoes hurt.

Still, when Daniel's name was called, he turned to a classmate and said, "This will be nice."

He rose and tilted toward the stairs. Doug Patton was there and could have helped but he wanted Daniel to do this on his own. Daniel put his right hand down to brace himself. His stepfather moved in to help but Daniel told him to just grab his arm.

Daniel made it onto the stage, took a couple of steps, grabbed the diploma, traded a handshake, then sat and smiled. The whole room applauded and someone yelled his name.

When it was over, the new graduates marched to the back of the room, where Daniel leaned backward against a wall and stared up in relief.

"I'm a free man," he said.

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About this series

Encounters is dedicated to small but meaningful stories. Sometimes they play out far from the tumult of the daily news; sometimes they may be part of it. To comment or suggest an idea for a story, contact editor Mike Wilson at mike@sptimes.com or (727) 892-2924.