

Keelin Brown

11/22/2024

The Art of Interview

Final Profile Story Draft

"I Would Still Do It Again": The Unbreakable Determination of Kevin Atherley



(Photo by Tiffany J. Gentry)

By Keelin Brown

On a mild but chilly late night in 2012, while on his way to see his cousin, 21 year-old Kevin Atherley witnessed a horrifying accident. Four teenagers had

crashed their car into a median. He pulled over and ran to the wrecked vehicle where he and others started to pull the victims from their car. One person was stuck in the passenger seat. Atherley headed back to his car to get his first aid kit.

“I went back to the trunk of my car,” Atherley said. “[And] while leaning over to the trunk, someone ran right into the back of the car, crushing me”

Atherley passed out. He woke up to the sound of people screaming and paramedics tending to him.

“I tried to stand up, and I just felt like I had no way of, staying up,” Atherley said. “I looked down and I saw my bones were sticking out of my pants and everything. It was crazy.”

Meanwhile, the cousin Atherley was on his way to visit, Devon Culley, began to worry.

“I was like ‘Man where is this guy?’ I called him, but he didn’t answer. So I called him back and he answered, and I asked him where are you at and are you okay? He told me he was fine, but I started to feel that something wasn’t right here.”

Culley jumped in his car, following his instincts and the noises of sirens. When he arrived, he was shocked by what he saw.

“The whole trunk of his car was literally pushed all the way to the back seat.... With that type of impact you know that it was a hard hit,” Culley said. He watched

his cousin be loaded into a waiting ambulance and head to Prince Georges' County hospital.

"I woke up in the ambulance and I was trying to see my injuries and I couldn't, and I ended up passing out again," Atherley said.

He was airlifted to the University of Maryland Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore and rushed to surgery. The surgery was long. Eventually, doctors stabilized Atherley.

Two days later, Atherley received more bad news.

"They told me that I had an infection in my left leg, and they were going to put an antibiotic rod (in it), but because of the damage they informed me that they had to amputate it," Atherley said. "I was so happy just to be alive, to be honest."

From there Atherley had to learn not just how to walk, but how to process his grief and fear about his uncertain future. The one thing that kept him from falling victim to despair was his newborn son Jayzen.

"He was always my motivation. He's like my pride and joy," Atherley said. "I wanted to be able to be up and walking again and show him that I could be independent, and that I could be here for him."

With his son on his mind, Atherley started his rehabilitation process under the guidance of recreational therapist Michael Henley. At first, Atherley was not interested in the exercises that Henley recommended, but slowly, he began to take interest.

“He told me about a program that does open gym, and I was like ‘wait there is a sport called wheelchair basketball?’” Atherley said. “He introduce me to the program, and I met some really cool guys, and I just got good at the sport.”

Henley and Atherley became more than therapist and patient; they became friends. Henley understood the psychological aspects of what Atherley was going through. He too had been a victim of a horrific accident. When he was 18, he had suffered a spinal cord injury during a car accident.

“I was in bed for at least, like a week and a half, two weeks, and they were trying to sit me up. And I was like, ‘Dude, I do not want to sit up at all. Please just put me back to bed’,” Henley said. He recalled the three months he spent in the hospital recovering from a broken neck: “It just feels weird. It's like you're kind of depressed. You're in, like, a dark state. So I can feel like Kevin probably felt, you know, just very uneasy with this situation.”

During his rehabilitation, Atherley was visited by Gideon Canelli, a member of the nonprofit organization called Trauma Survivor Network. The organization provides

a community resource for survivors and their families to rebuild and connect after a traumatic physical injury. Canelli's personal story and fitness inspired Atherley, who started pushing himself harder with Henley.

"The experience alone with him coming to speak to me, gave me hope." Atherley said. "I wanted to do that for everybody else that comes after me."

He joined the Trauma Survivor Network as a peer mentor and began building connections with other amputees, but found he wanted to develop longer lasting and deeper support than the TSN Peer Visitation Program was set up for. So Atherley – a tall, confident athlete whose signature smirk conveys motivation and heart – decided to develop his own campaign, 'Never Lost A Step'.

"I wanted to create something - a platform, or something that gives people the ability to outlet, to share and connect," Atherley said, in a determined way. "I want to build a community... I want to build family."

'Never Lost A Step' provides financial resources and community support for people disabled by traumatic injuries. Since its founding in 2013, the campaign has helped support over 15 trauma survivors. Atherley has distributed information on housing, financial support, legal assistance, and rehabilitation services, and connected survivors with friends and colleagues of his own who might be able to

help them in a more informal way than the hospital itself was allowed to do. The campaign remains active to this day.

Atherley's longtime girlfriend Zhanna Thompson, who he met four years after the accident, is touched by the campaign's mission. She believes that it can bring in more people in the future.

"I think what really inspires people, and what makes people so comfortable with him, is that he's just extremely genuine and just open about his feelings," Thompson said. "He just speaks from his heart, and he really deeply cares about others, and he means to use his experience to help others."

While developing his campaign and working through physical therapy, Atherley was also nurturing a passion for wheelchair basketball. In 2013, he joined the Maryland Ravens, a nonprofit organization that uses sports to support Baltimore City's disabled students and educators, where he demonstrated wheelchair basketball techniques to other people with disabilities for the next three years. The large, energetic leader was a powerhouse on the court, and went on to play for Edinboro University for four years before graduating with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, with minors in political science and sociology. Finally in 2019, he joined the Medstar Health NRH Punishers, a D1 team in the National Wheelchair Basketball Association, alongside paralympic basketball player Trevon Jenifer.

When he is not playing basketball, Atherley focuses on developing his own Caribbean & Guyanese catering company. Before starting his own business, he worked as a sous chef for his aunt Althea Culley's restaurant, Tee's Caribbean Cuisine, from 2008-2011. He was inspired by his aunt's love and passion for cooking.

“She taught me almost everything I know,” Atherley said. “The breakdown, the ingredients, the recipes, everything. Just knowing people are appreciating a healthy meal is what kind of like drives me.”

Since 2013, Atherley has run Kevyin’s Kitchen, a food catering business, private chef, and meal prep service that distributes many dishes to local events and individuals. They cook meals and serve beverages and desserts like jerk honey salmon, lemon pepper shrimp linguini, pineapple strawberry banana smoothie, ice cream waffle sandwich, and oxtails. Atherley believes his cooking gives people a feeling of his cultural heritage, and particularly enjoys sharing his food with others with disabilities.

“It's that additional love, knowing I'm helping someone within this community of mine,” he said.

Today Atherley, now 33, remains active in the ‘Never Lost A Step’ campaign, and is also training to be a wheelchair basketball hopeful for the 2028 Paralympic

Games while simultaneously developing his culinary career. Atherley hopes his story and accomplishments will help to dispel people's misconceptions about what people with disabilities can do.

"I just want people to look at others with disabilities differently. They're capable of doing everything you can do," Atherley said. "We're beyond, like, our disability."

If he had to do it over again, would he still get out of his car that night twelve years ago?

"I have no regrets at all, and if I were able to go back in time, I would still do it again. But," Atherley said, "with caution."