

Injured as a teen, Townsend keeps fighting spirit

Liltera R. Williams

Special to The Recorder

“Wake up Max,” J.T. Townsend ordered in a polite monotone manner.

The Dell computer screen emerged from hibernation as Max quickly responded and waited for J.T.’s next command.

The Multimedia Max Home System is a voice-activated computer program that allows J.T. to control every electronic component in his sports-decorated bedroom, including lights, appliances, the TV and caller ID for incoming telephone calls.

“I’m still going to use it when I start walking again,” J.T. confessed while showcasing a sly smile. It’s that type of optimism and unwavering faith that makes him such an inspiration. He was both humble and appreciative when sharing the details of his story.

J.T.’s story

J.T. received a scholarship to attend Episcopal High School in 2003. On October 8, 2004, he suffered a spinal cord injury after tackling the running back in a game against Bishop Kenny High School.

As the captain of the football team, he shuffled the responsibilities on both offense and defense as a wide receiver and strong safety, respectively. He vividly recalled the details of the Friday night lights incident.

“I tackled the running back and then I fell to the ground. When I tried to get up, I couldn’t push myself up. The trainers came out and they asked me what was wrong and I just repeated, ‘I can’t get up, I can’t get up.’ Later on, I started to lose my breath and then I just went unconscious.”



Photo provided by the J.T. Townsend Family

J.T. Townsend was injured during a football game in 2004, confining him to a wheelchair. However, he is determined to walk again and become more self-sufficient.

J.T. was quickly transported to Shands Hospital. He woke up hours later, connected to a ventilator and other medical tubes that assisted in keeping him alive.

The doctors told J.T.’s family that he might not live to see another day, but four weeks later he was able to talk, and eight months later he became eligible for Diaphragmatic Pacing System surgery, a device that would allow him to breathe on his own.

While at Episcopal, J.T. received many awards and recognition, including The Episcopal High School Foundation Award for Excellence of Character and the Best Athlete of the Episcopal High School Class of 2005.

J.T.’s football and basketball jerseys were also retired in 2009 at a special ceremony for his contributions on the football and basketball teams.

He is now a senior at the Universi-



Photo Provided by Liltera R. Williams

Townsend and the author show off T-shirts supporting each other’s endeavors.

ty of North Florida majoring in Sports Management. Before the incident, J.T. had plans to accept a football scholarship to attend Florida State University.

However, he truly understands that everything happens for a reason.

Finding his meaning

J.T. constantly emphasizes that his incident was not an accident. He believes that he was chosen by God to carry out a mission to help others.

The support from various strangers on the First Coast and professional golfer Fred Funk, who held a golf tournament

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What: The Bad Habit Par-Tee to benefit the JT Townsend Foundation

Where: Nippers Beach Grille
2309 Beach Boulevard, Jacksonville Beach
(904) 247-3300

Time: 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, May 8

Enjoy a private party during one of the greatest weeks of the year in Ponte Vedra: THE PLAYERS. Bohemian Buffet from 6:30 to 9:30 and a signature cocktail will be yours while you listen to the sounds of PILI PILI and vote for the craziest golf pants contest. Players from the Jacksonville Jaguars, pro golfers and “Funk’s Punks” will all be on hand. Tickets are \$50 and on sale at Nippers.



as a fundraiser to build the wheelchair accessible home that J.T. and his family currently reside in, motivated him to develop his own platform for giving back.

The J.T. Townsend Foundation was officially established in April 2011 with a mission to better the lives of children and adults with disabilities on the First Coast by providing financial assistance, adaptive equipment, and research funding while fusing the resources, finances and spirit of those with disabilities to take their next first step.

So far, the foundation has collected enough funds to purchase necessary equipment for the following recipients: Luther Delp (Easy Stand Glider), Harold Banks (Forearm Crutches), Nate Cunningham (Rifton Dynamic Stander), Zachary Fellin (Pool Heater) and Jack Hutchinson (Rifton Shower Chair).

J.T. Townsend and THE PLAYERS

On May 8, the foundation will host The Bad Habit Par-Tee Benefit to raise more funds for future recipients. Tickets can be purchased online at www.J.T.townsendfoundation.org or by donating \$35 or at Nippers Beach Grille. Call (904) 716-4947 for more information.

J.T. looks ahead

These days, the word “can’t” is no longer a part of J.T.’s vocabulary. He aims to live a normal life by maintaining his independence and participating in regular activities, such as going to the mall and the movies and cheering on his favorite teams at sporting events.

Although J.T. is not yet able to move limbs on his own, he has miraculously regained feeling all over, an advancement that doctors did not expect at this



Photo Provided by the J.T. Townsend Foundation

J.T. Townsend laughs with Jack Hutchinson. The J.T. Townsend Foundation was established last year to provide assistance to children and adults with disabilities and has been able to provide equipment and financial assistance to several individuals in Northeast Florida.

stage in his recovery process. In addition, J.T. attends physical therapy sessions every Friday and is able to be extracted from his wheelchair with the assistance of a Hoyer lift. A magnetic mouth stick also assists him with operating his laptop and cell phone, granting him the privilege of rekindling relationships with old friends on Facebook and sending text messages.

When J.T. graduates from UNF in the fall, he plans to utilize his sports management degree while working behind the scenes and handling everyday operations for a professional football, basketball, or baseball team. He also plans to continue expanding the efforts of his foundation to help as many people as possible.

Sharing his spirit

J.T.’s competitive drive and determination catapults his desire to conquer the hindrance of his condition.

When asked what keeps him going, he responded, “My faith, support from

family and friends, and the mentality of not giving up and still believing that one day I will walk again.”

J.T. encourages anyone else who has experienced a similar circumstance to never lose hope.

“Don’t let your disability hold you back from continuing life because life does go on. There are resources out there that will allow you to continue to pursue your career and just live life in general,” he stated.

J.T. was injured in the midst of pursuing what he loved doing since he was 7 years old. If he had the opportunity to reverse the effects of that life-changing



Photo provided by the J.T. Townsend Family

Although J.T. is currently confined to a wheelchair, he is determined to be rehabilitated to walk on his own again.

tackle, he wouldn’t change a thing.

He’s living out his purpose one yard at a time and scoring touchdowns with every smile that he generates.

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Plans tabled for new assisted living facility in Ponte Vedra Beach.
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LITTLE LOCALS GIVE BIG THANKS AT PRESCHOOL



Kelly Hould/The Recorder

The preschoolers of Christ Episcopal Day School in Ponte Vedra Beach presented songs about Florida and Thanksgiving at their yearly performance.
For more photos, see Page 22.

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GIVING BACK ONCE AGAIN

Harbour Island Holiday Open House benefits JT Townsend Foundation and the community.



Liltera R. Williams/Special to The Recorder

Lynda and Richard Masulli will hold the second Harbour Island Open House to benefit the JT Townsend Foundation. The open house features a holiday tour of their Harbour Island home, which is decorated with numerous Christmas trees and other holiday items.



Tree photos provided by the Masulli family

Radko tree

Liltera R. Williams

The Recorder

Christmas always seems to come early for the Masullis.

Actually — it hardly ever ends.

As avid ornament collectors and tree connoisseurs for the past 17 years, Richard and Lynda Masulli have dedicated a good part of their time to collecting the finest in Christmas decorations. The loving couple relocated from New Jersey to the Ponte Vedra area and began collecting Christopher Radko ornaments in 1995; however, Richard probably had no idea he would become so involved when his wife began requesting the ornaments as gifts from others for her birthday each year. He is now the avid ornament collector, while Lynda focuses on enhancements for the trees and other holiday displays that can be seen throughout their spacious Harbour Island home.

My first tour proved to be an interesting adventure, as the Masullis led me on a magical journey of ornaments galore.

I was first invited into the kitchen for a brief introduction of a 4-foot Wisconsin Balsam tree by Milaegeers that was decorated with Patricia Breen Gingerbread coloration ornaments. The Masullis began collecting Breen ornaments in 2005, and ornaments from this designer appear most frequently along the tour.

The JTTF Christmas Tree Tour began as a result of the Masullis' involvement with the JT Townsend Foundation.

JT attended Episcopal High School with their godson. An incident on the football field caused JT to become confined to a wheelchair. Fred Funk and other members of the community rallied to provide for JT and in Dec. 2006, they presented JT and his family with a wheelchair-accessible home. The Ma-



Shiny Brite tree



Russian Santa tree



Breen Holly and Poinsettia tree

sullis were part of the team that helped outfit the home and fittingly provided a decorated Christmas tree done in JT's favorite FSU colors. When JT formed the JT Townsend Foundation in 2010, in order to give back to the community that had helped him so much, he invited the Masullis to become board members.

"We love JT's contagious spirit, as well as his desire to offer inspiration and hope to others," Lynda said.

This is the second year the event is taking place, and the Foundation hopes to gain even more recognition this time around.

"This event extends way beyond the material act of giving. It's about believing and dedicating yourself to helping others," Lynda said.

Most of the tree ornaments are hand blown and painted in Poland. The col-



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Breen Red and Green tree

Photos provided by the Masulli family

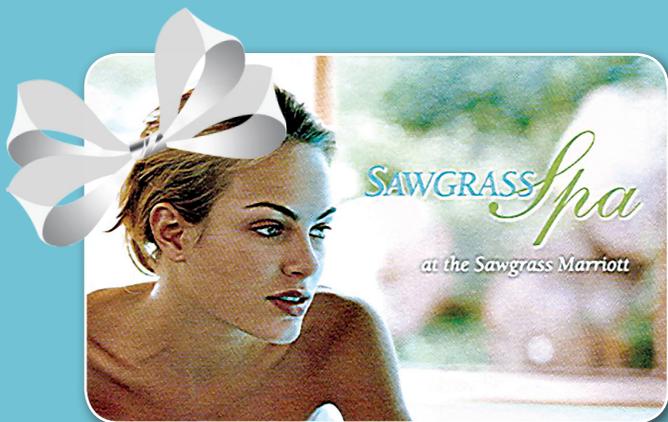


Above: Mistletoe tree

Left: Gingerbread tree



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Giving Back

Continued from 27

lection also includes German pieces, such as the Ino Schaller papier mache candy containers made from the original Schaller family chocolate molds.

The Masullis started decorating in early October to prepare for this year's open house event.

On Nov. 29, JT and the members of the JT Townsend Foundation will hold what has quickly become their largest fundraising event of the year.

Guests will be able to kick off the holidays and enjoy the 27 exquisitely decorated Christmas trees on display. Tickets to the event are \$25, and all proceeds will be donated to JTTF. Everyone attending will receive a printed guide as they tour the 9,500-square-foot home, browsing the uniquely decorated Christmas trees, adorned with over 2500 total ornaments.

Volunteers will explain the theme and origin of the individual trees, which range from 2' to 12'. There is a 2' wispy Bee Tree decorated with amber lights that rests in the downstairs powder room and the 7-foot Black Tinsel White House tree next to the theater snack bar upstairs that has the whole collection of annual White House ornaments, started by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

The 27th tree, affectionately labeled as the JT tree, sits on the piano downstairs and is decorated with exclusive JT Gives Back ornaments, handcrafted and designed in Poland by MIA.

The 2012 ornament is available in either white or red glitter and there are a few of last year's 2011 ornaments with FSU colors available. The JT Give Back ornaments can be purchased on the official JTTF website, at Gregory's Jewelers or the TPC Sawgrass Pro Shop for \$50.

The Foundation will also host a gala that same evening, which is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. Tickets for the gala are on sale now for \$100. Guests will be greeted with champagne and light hors d'oeuvres and desserts will also be offered.

Since 2010, The JT Townsend Foun-



Mark Roberts tree

Provided by the Masulli family

dation has helped over 20 children and adults with disabilities. Last year, the event raised over \$15,000.

"This is such a beautiful event for sharing and giving back. I'm just glad I have the opportunity to help others," JT said.

JTTF Christmas Tree Tour

121 Bristol Place in Marsh Landing's Harbour Island

Daytime Open House, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; tickets, \$25

Evening gala, 7 p.m.; tickets, \$100

For more information, visit www.JTGivesBack.org or call (904) 716-4947.

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