

# Aspen Daily News

## Basalt woman donates a therapy device to help the paralyzed walk

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*'Tucker' will be available for therapeutic use at Aspen Club and Spa free of charge*

Amanda Boxtel's journey has been one of triumph over tragedy, and she is now making sure that others in the Roaring Fork Valley and beyond who suffer from paralysis have access to a therapy device that allows them to walk once again.

Boxtel, 47, who hails from Brisbane, Australia, and lives in Basalt, is leasing her personal bionic exoskeleton suit to the Aspen Club and Spa for \$1 a year in order to allow people suffering from paralysis access to the suit. The device will be housed at the facility pending final details that are being worked out.

The physical therapy device, which is made by Ekso Bionics and called an Ekso, is worn around the waist and legs to allow people with spinal cord injuries to stand and walk using a motorized function.

It can also be used to aid people who have suffered a stroke, have a neurological disorder, or have weakness in their lower extremities.

The exoskeleton is adjustable, and can accommodate most people up to 220 pounds, who are between 5-foot, 2-inches and 6-foot, 2-inches tall, depending on the leg length. For hemiplegics, who have paralysis affecting only one side of the body, the device can be turned off on either the right or left side, to allow for natural movement.

"It only takes a matter of minutes to adjust the exoskeleton for a new user," Boxtel said.

Not everyone can afford to purchase the \$150,000 device, so it will be available free of charge at the Aspen Club. But while access is free, funds are needed to cover the cost of the physical therapists and their training.

"I want every person that's going to walk in this device to walk for free, because it should be a human right to walk," she said. "Through the [Bridging Bionics] Foundation we'll raise the funds, then give the Aspen Club a chunk of money so that will then offset the costs for the physical therapists."

Boxtel suffered a spinal cord injury while skiing on Feb. 27, 1992, but has since taken steps to ensure that the disability doesn't define her. She co-founded Challenge Aspen in December 1995, and has since been a writer, professional speaker, skiing instructor to the disabled at the Aspen Skiing Co. (using a mono-ski), and is currently executive director of the nonprofit Bridging Bionics Foundation.

Through her nonprofit, Boxtel hopes to raise enough funds to offset costs accrued by the Aspen Club for use of the facility and its physical therapists, who need to be trained to work with the device and assist people "who are paralyzed or have lower extremity weakness to walk."

She said that between \$70,000 and \$115,000 would have to be raised annually to sustain the program.



Photo courtesy of Charles Engelbert  
Amanda Boxtel walks with her physical therapist, Elizabeth Pettit.

A fundraiser is scheduled for Wednesday from 5:30-7 p.m. at Morgenthal Frederics Opticians, 533 E. Cooper Ave. in Aspen. Drinks and hors d'oeuvres will be offered, and Boxel will demonstrate how the exoskeleton works and explain the therapeutical values involved.

She noted that there have already been two \$25,000 donations made toward getting the program up and going, from locals Glenda and Gerald Greenwald, and Lenny "Boogie" Weinglass.

She praised the Greenwalds for always believing in her, and said she has always been amazed by the generosity of Weinglass.

"Boogie taught me about the power of giving," she said. "He has supported me ever since I was paralyzed — 23 years. ... He gave me my first wheelchair ... and helped me buy a hand cycle. He's just a blessed human being."

### **Physical benefits and the future**

Boxel noted that internal organs are meant to hang, and she said walking helps her think more clearly, improves her circulation and digestion, and staves off issues such as edema and constipation.

"When I walk it takes away the fluid in my ankles," she said. "It's so much more than psycho-social and the benefits of standing up and looking at you eye to eye. It's the therapeutic benefits. People think it's just about walking and it's not. It's about quality of life. How do we give every one of these people the quality of life they deserve? I've been experiencing it, and I want to share it."

But she noted that people have to still meet some "medical inclusion criteria," with joint contractures being an issue that disallows them from using an exoskeleton.

"Prepare your body to walk again, because we can. Keep your range of motion, keep flexible, because you can get up and you can walk now," Boxel said. "There's every reason to maintain your quality of life and your flexibility."

She has owned the Ekso for a few years and truly understands both the psychological and physiological benefits, and wants to share the experience with the community.

But Boxel added that she doesn't use it every day, and would rather that it be available to anyone who can benefit from it.

She said there are 15 to 20 locals who are looking at utilizing the suit including Mackenzie Langley, Denis Murray, Adam Lavender, and Leah Potts.

She affectionately refers to the exoskeleton as "Tucker," which is named after her beloved golden retriever that died just four days before she started walking in the device.

"It all happened and it was traumatic," she said of her dog's passing. "So, I still walk with Tucker when I go, so that's my reason ... he was my baby."

Despite her own limitations, Boxel wants nothing more than to see people who have been paralyzed in the community and beyond be able to experience the joy of walking once more.

She envisions two- to three-hour physical therapy sessions for people who want to again stand tall, and joked that they can get a different perspective than looking at "navels and nose hair" all day.

She noted that the foundation's future goals are three-fold: To provide funding for individuals and communities to have programs to help those who can't walk do so again; to educate people about programs and therapeutical devices that are available; and further research and development for a more comfortable, functional, and individualized exoskeleton that is affordable and minimizes the risk of falling.

"The question is, how do we begin making it comfortable and individualize it? The end goal would be, of course, to then weave personality into it and add color and high heels" she said with a laugh.