

Bridging Bionics to highlight local athletes at Aspen gala

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Mackenzie Langley works on her choreography with Bridging Bionics on Wednesday, July 2, 2025, in Carbondale.

Austin Colbert/The Aspen Times

After enduring seven major surgeries within three years, Amanda Boxtel, founder and executive director of Bridging Bionics, not only felt like a prisoner in her own body, but she also felt like giving up.

So last November, she spent three days in New Zealand taking aerial classes with Chloe Loftus, who has worked with others in wheelchairs. It was so inspiring that she's bringing Loftus and her rigger, Greg Kolbe, to perform with Bridging Bionics athlete Mackenzie Langley at the Rise Up Gala on July 7.

The gala has the potential to raise nearly half of Bridging Bionics' \$1.2 million annual operating budget, allowing the nonprofit to further the mobility of people — whom they call athletes — living with neurological challenges such as spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, strokes, and more.

Though past gala entertainment has featured award-winning international dancers in wheelchairs or those with an amputated leg, like professional dancer Musa Motha, this year, Boxtel wanted to highlight locals who have benefited so much from Bridging Bionics.

"This event is not about bringing in world-class wheelchair dancers; this gala is from our athletes and for our athletes," she said. "There's no better way to portray movement without limitation than shining the light on our very own athletes."

And Langley brilliantly exemplifies the success and freedom Bridging Bionics provides to so many participants.

On June 23, 2014, at age 16, she was a passenger in a car accident in Aspen. It resulted in a broken back, among other severe injuries, and instant paralysis below the waist. As soon as she could have visitors, Boxtel was one of the first to see her at Craig Hospital.



Choreographer and dancer Chloe Loftus, right, goes over the steps with Mackenzie Langley, left, and Amanda Boxtel on Wednesday, July 2, 2025, in Carbondale. Austin Colbert/The Aspen Times

“She told me, ‘It’s going to be OK. We’re going to get this program up and running in the valley, and you’re going to be taken care of,’” Langley said. “Being part of that contagious energy of innovation and curiosity and healing in the community totally impacted me and has shaped the kind of person I have become since. It really showed me that there are no limits to what is possible.”

She ended up studying abroad when people said that was impossible and launched Lighthouse, which connects nonprofits to necessary resources through software programs.

“Amanda shows that you can do great things, and to be in the presence of that brilliance is contagious,” she said.

Yet, even Boxtel, who has been in a wheelchair for 33 years and learned to ski and do plenty of other activities, began to lose hope after her seven surgeries between 2021 and 2024. When she tried to ski last season, she couldn't.

"I felt like I've been living in a state, more or less, of grieving the loss of my mobility because of enduring seven surgeries ... Sometimes, I felt like it was all I could do to survive," she said. "Not being able to ski and just pushing through life has become more challenging, and I'm aging in my body with disability, and everything kind of came to a head. I wanted to explore something new in a three-dimensional playground that would give me a sense of flying and freedom, and I wondered if aerials could be it."

Her first attempt with Loftus resulted in motion sickness.

"I felt like my body was still failing me. I went back to the hotel room at night, and I cried," she said.

But Loftus encouraged her to tap into the persistence, courage, and strength that have helped her thrive over the years — and that has led to founding Bridging Bionics, which have given so many people more freedom.

The next day, Loftus and Boxtel played with improvisational movement.



Choreographer and dancer Chloe Loftus, left, of New Zealand goes over the steps with the Bridging Bionics athletes on Wednesday, July 2, 2025, in Carbondale. Austin Colbert/The Aspen Times

“I loved the symbiosis of us together. She was my shadow and my light, and the light never fails. All of that yearning and the stretching and the reaching for what could be all came together in a state of flow and grace and unison,” Boxtel said. “My wheelchair has given me my legs. I wanted to let it go, but I realized my wheelchair is a part of me, and by transporting it into a three-dimensional playground, I was able to open up new horizons of movement. It was life-infusing for me to experience that.”

When she asked Langley — Bridging Bionics’ first client back in 2015 — if she would try aerials and perform at the gala, Langley enthusiastically accepted.

“I’m just a big person who says ‘yes’ to life and opportunities, and I’m also a huge supporter of Amanda Boxtel, so when she calls me up and says, ‘Hey, I have this crazy idea, but if someone’s going to be willing to listen to me, it’s going to be you,’ I’m definitely there with open ears,” she said. “It’s in line with my motto for life, (which) is learning and growing. There’s so much about being disabled that is not portrayed in media or in day-to-day life, but there’s so much joy, so I think this is a

great opportunity to show some of that beauty and how creative and different and cool and incredible the things we can create are, even as disabled folks.”

While other surprises may arise during the gala, the big “rise-up” moment will occur as athletes on stage showcase six pieces of technology, and Langley literally rises up in her wheelchair.

So, it’s only fitting that this year’s program features butterflies as symbols of transformation.

“What the caterpillar sees is maybe the end of its world, but it is really a new beginning. We all have the ability — maybe not physically, but mentally and spiritually — to transform and to recreate ourselves. A neurological condition or diagnosis could be a death sentence, but really, it’s the beginning of what becomes the butterfly.”

The metaphor perfectly describes Boxtel’s last few challenging years. Since then, she has once again risen up and rediscovered her wings.

“If I allow the metaphor to envelop my being, I already have my wings, and Chloe Loftus helped me fly,” she said, adding that Loftus and Colby, who has worked for Cirque du Soleil and will assist at the gala, have helped her “expound on our vision that the human spirit has no limitation and that movement is filled with possibility in all dimensions.”

This year, Bridging Bionics celebrates its 10-year anniversary with a new facility in Carbondale. As a result of its latest mid-valley location, it has increased the number of people it serves by 27%, as well as its number of sessions and physical therapists. From Jan. 1 to May 31, Bridging Bionics provided 883.75 sessions to 43 clients in Carbondale and 664.75 sessions to 39 clients in its Glenwood location. About 64% of its clients and their families are economically disadvantaged, and traditional medical insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid do not cover the needed therapies.

Additionally, it offers group training sessions in strength, conditioning, and balance for various abilities.

“We can have individuals working alongside one another, and that is indicative of moving towards our theme of bridging the community. It has turned into a social occasion,” she said. “It’s creating community and conversation as we work out, and that has always been my vision, but we haven’t had the space to do it, and now we do. It’s the most joyful time of my whole week when I go to a group class, and we get to laugh and giggle and work out together.”

Participants often linger for over an hour at the large lunch table, forming the bonds that offer much-needed support and camaraderie.



Rigger Gregor Kolbe, front left, of New Zealand mans the ropes for Mackenzie Langley as Bridging Bionics founder Amanda Boxtel watches in the back on Wednesday, July 2, 2025, in Carbondale. Austin Colbert/The Aspen Times

The gala also generates a sense of community, allowing donors to watch short video clips about specific athletes, as well as giving them a chance to mingle and dance together while DJ Naka spins tunes after dinner.

“Community is so powerful, and when you get together in person, you really get to feel it in a way that shows dollars don’t just pay for things, but they move hearts, and they build better people and communities,” Langley said about the gala. “To be a part of that magic is something everyone should want.”

Rise Up Gala event details:

The Rise Up Gala will be held from 6 p.m., July 7 at Doerr-Hosier Center at the Aspen Meadows.

Highlights for the auction include the following:

- Ski or ride with Olympian Gretchen Bleiler with Aspen Mountain Powder Tours for nine guests.
- Take a flight for you and one other on a real fighter jet piloted by a Bridging Bionics athlete, TOPGUN graduate, and veteran Matthew “Whiz” Buckley, in partnership with the No Fallen Heroes Foundation.
- Three nights at Solage, Auberge Resorts Collection, in Calistoga with VIP wine tastings for up to four people. Plus, bring home 10 of Napa’s most acclaimed wines.
- Wine-paired dinner for 12 in your home with Chef Michael Rueggeberg.
- The Best of Aspen: Hometown Fun for two, including two tickets to the 2026 Food & Wine Classic, a one-year membership to the Caribou Club for two, two tickets to the 2025 Jazz Aspen Snowmass Labor Day Experience, a \$500 gift certificate for two to dine at Casa Tua, a \$250 gift certificate for two to dine at Mawa’s Kitchen, and two tickets to Snowmass Lost Forest.
- An eight-night stay at the Ultimate San Miguel de Allende Retreat in Mexico for 10, or choose a four-night stay for 22 guests.

Tickets for Rise Up Gala are \$500. More information bridgingbionics.org.