

Bridging Bionics gala raises necessary funds to change lives

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On Dec. 27, 2024, a skiing accident left New Mexico-resident Ulrich John paralyzed. He had been a professional skier and was simply giving his son a ski lesson on a green run when he suddenly lost his balance. Last March, he participated in Bridging Bionics' newest initiative, the Bridging Lives Program, which offers interventions, as well as housing and transportation, to people who live outside of the community. The nonprofit's advanced robotic technologies allowed John to fully bear weight on his legs and walk again, with the technology's assistance.

The Bridging Lives Program is just one of Bridging Bionics' interventions that give the gift of mobility back to clients — whom they affectionately refer to as athletes because it is, indeed, an athletic endeavor mentally, emotionally and physically to overcome limitations — through complimentary physical therapy and innovative technology.

In the last 10 years and eight months, Bridging Bionics has gifted more than 26,100 physical therapy sessions. It provides an average of 68 clients with an average of 337 physical therapy sessions a month in its two facilities in Carbondale and Glenwood Springs; 76% of these clients are considered economically disadvantaged. Private medical insurance, Medicare and Medicaid do not cover the therapies.

“Our client demand continues to increase, and we have a waitlist,” said Amanda Boxtel, executive director of Bridging Bionics.

Last January, the nonprofit purchased its Center for Neurorehabilitation in Carbondale by meeting its capital campaign goal with a \$1 million gift from an anonymous donor, who heard Boxtel present a TED talk in Long Beach, Calif., over a decade ago. At the time, the exoskeleton was just a prototype and hadn't been taken to market yet.

That same anonymous donor has pledged a three-year matching challenge grant of \$500,000 to fund the Bridging Lives Program, which enables people from outside the Roaring Fork Valley to visit for a two-week intensive, which grants access to daily physical therapy and advanced robotic technologies; the nonprofit awards scholarships to qualified applicants with neurological mobility conditions, such as spinal cord injuries, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis or motor complications from a traumatic brain injury, stroke or Parkinson's disease.

“We are here to serve as a bridge to regaining a better quality of life,” Boxtel said.

The program has allowed John to ski again, using an adaptive sit-ski. He has skied since age 3, and he and his wife raised three of their six children to be professional skiers.

“I was probably unconscious for some minutes,” he said, recalling his accident. “I woke up all of the sudden. I had a voice in my head that said, ‘Hey, you better fix this now because this is the last chance.’”

Even though the hospital in Albuquerque saved his life by putting in a stint in his aorta, it didn’t have the resources to support further recovery. He didn’t know where to turn until he heard about Boxtel, who lovingly encouraged him to go home to Sweden, comb his hair and learn how to dress — and then they’d see what they could do. She gave him the hope to continue his recovery — and return to the slopes.

“For being almost a professional master skier for almost 55, 60 years, I had an opportunity to get out there again. I mean, you can’t really describe that feeling,” John said, describing his experience skiing again, as well as his time in the Bridging Lives Program. “Today, I got connected with Earth, myself, and got a lot of positive feelings — hope — because I was standing up. To reconnect and all of the sudden again do your moves and walking and standing up, communicating with the world around you, it’s amazing. I think we should be honest: The healthcare system cannot, itself, provide the necessary tools, time and effort for what’s needed after, and this is why Bridging Bionics is such an important part. One little step in the right direction is worth everything.”

Once clients return home after the two-weeks Bridging Lives Program, the nonprofit continues to support their progress by providing \$10,000 for equipment, which they can use at home.

“More than anything, they get a belief and possibility and hope that they’re able to stand and bear weight — and the realization that when you move your body consistently and regularly and you stand and fully bear weight, you’re ultimately going to have a better quality of life,” Boxtel said about the new program. “All of your bodily systems work more fluidly and efficiently. That’s the feedback we’re hearing when they get to experience our program in a regular consistent fashion: Everything starts to work (because) it’s when you sit, you begin to die. We need to keep moving. We need to keep standing up. Even though we’re paralyzed, we need to bear weight on our legs, so that our bladder and bowels, our kidneys and everything works more efficiently — even our hearts. We get a cardio workout. Plus, we’re not then prone to joint contractures and all of these secondary complications that occur as a result of paralysis and living a sedentary lifestyle.”

In addition to the \$500,000 over three years matching donation, the anonymous donor pledged to match every dollar raised at this year’s Rise Up Gala, which takes place on July 10 at the Hotel Jerome, because he was so inspired by the nonprofit’s work after visiting its facility and seeing the athletes in action last week.

After witnessing it firsthand, his executive staff member emailed Boxtel, saying: “I knew I would love what I saw, but, wow, words don’t cover it. Absolutely humbling and incredible. I know there must be very hard days, but the resiliency and positivity was palpable. Thank you for showing us a slice of what you and everyone have built.”

The gala allows hundreds of attendees to see Bridging Bionics' work via not only videos of client stories shown during dinner, but also with clients actually standing on stage wearing exoskeletons or otherwise representing the nonprofit's successes.

"We're unlike Challenge Aspen, say, that is visible on the ski slopes with their adaptive equipment. We're behind closed doors. We're in two amazing facilities, but we're not visible to the world. That's what this gala does for us: We need visibility and education and awareness to show people the impact that we're having," she said.

Bridging Bionics has just added a new self-balancing exoskeleton, called the Wandercraft Atalante X, to its four other exoskeletons, which help clients stand and walk. Valued at \$237,000, the Conti family generously gifted it. The technology allows for hands-free, crutch-free movement via an overhead harness for safe movement; Bridging Bionics spent \$20,000 for the Solo-Step Overhead Track System and will demonstrate the full technology at the gala.

"It has really taken it to the next level that we can accommodate everybody, every condition (including those who can't move their arms)," she said. "What we have that is so unique is we have now five different exoskeletons that we can offer. In essence, we're doing something that is not found anywhere else in the world. We're gifting access, whereas some of the top rehabilitation centers in the nation do not have all of these technologies, and you have to be an inpatient to be able to have access (to the technology)."

In addition to therapy and facility costs, Bridging Bionics pays for annual service and warranty fees for each robotic device, which exceed \$120,000 annually.

Additionally, its Glenwood Springs facility, Midland Fitness, is for sale.

"That building is for sale at \$1.25 million. The threat looms that we may not have a base there if it is sold. The facility is crucial to the success of our program as we accommodate individuals from Eagle/Vail to Grand Junction in our Glenwood facility," Boxel said. "I would love for a donor to step up and buy that. You know, I'm a visionary. So anything's possible, right?"

Bridging Bionics' annual operating budget is \$1.2 million. Boxel hopes to raise two-thirds of that in revenue at the July 10 gala.