

Parachutist tells students about life after tragedy Learning to soar again after heartbreaking loss

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Carl Matzelle

Dana Bowman likes to say he's just an ordinary guy.

Sure he is. An ordinary guy without legs who jumps out of airplanes.

A guy who sky-dived six months after losing his legs in a midair collision - and a guy who convinced skeptical Army brass that he should be the first double amputee to re-enlist.

Just an ordinary guy.

This week, you might see the North Ridgeville native parachuting into school stadiums.

He's here to talk about refusing to give in when something gets in your way - whether you're an injured Army veteran or a mixed-up teenager.

More than 1,000 high-schoolers watched Monday as Bowman, 42, stepped out of an airplane circling Lakewood Stadium at 3,500 feet. They cheered when his yellow and blue parachute opened, the American flag trailing it. They yelled and applauded as he landed smack at the 50-yard line, wearing high-tech, titanium prosthetic legs.

After changing into dress blues, Bowman spoke to a packed auditorium about how he turned disaster into hope and disability into triumph.

Bowman told students to seek mentors and learn from them, then pass their knowledge to others.

"My life changed in one split second," Bowman said. "But I'm here to say you can still make a difference. Our society today desperately lacks role models. I challenge all of you to learn and give back something."

As Bowman does.

He graduated in 1981 from North Ridgeville High School, where he was a below-average student prone to fighting and tripping fire alarms. He and his friends were wild about horses and motorcycles. But after graduation, he became an Army Ranger and was awarded the Bronze Star for valor during the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989.

On Feb. 6, 1994, Bowman was practicing the "Diamond Track" maneuver as a member of the Army's Golden Knights Parachuting Team. He and Sgt. José Aguillon, his friend and mentor, were supposed to crisscross in the sky. They collided at 300 mph, and Aguillon died instantly. His arms sliced through Bowman's legs at the knees.

The next day, from his bed at Walter Reed Hospital, Bowman told his parents that he was going to jump again.

"We didn't take him seriously at first, but when he began designing his own legs in their lab, I knew he wasn't kidding," his mother, Donna, recalled.

On Aug. 13, six months after the accident, Bowman jumped from 13,000 feet above Raeford, N.C. The next day, he joined a skydiving wedding for a Golden Knights teammate. Three months later, he re-enlisted in the Army.

Even that was a challenge, because Army commanders worried that he was unfit for duty. They relented after watching him run two miles and complete the Army's physical fitness test. After jumping nine times a day for six weeks, Bowman returned to the Golden Knights and became the team's lead speaker and recruiting commander. Since his accident, Bowman has jumped more than 1,000 times, visited hundreds of amputees injured in Iraq and Afghanistan, and talked with students nationwide.

He retired from the Army in 1996 and received his bachelor's degree in commercial aviation at the University of North Dakota four years later. His computer-assisted prosthetics allow him to fly planes, helicopters and hot-air balloons without handicap controls.

He also likes to run, water-ski and scuba-dive. Depending on the sport, he changes feet like most people change shoes for different occasions. His right prosthesis is equipped with a mini-computer that adjusts his gait as he walks.

So what could be left for this ordinary guy to accomplish?

He wants to break the record for the world's highest stratosphere jump, performed Aug. 16, 1960, by Joe Kittinger. Kittinger jumped from a helium balloon at 102,800 feet, almost 20 miles above the earth. The fall took 4 minutes, 36 seconds.

More important, perhaps, Bowman plans to continue to battle the barriers facing physically impaired people.

"The triumph of the human spirit lies in all of us," Bowman said. "We are all disabled in one way or another when we think we can't live out our dreams."
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