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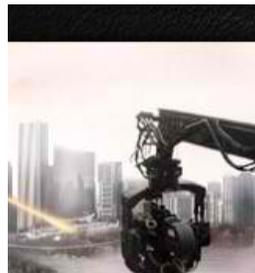
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Ex-NBA player relearns to walk with help from friend

December 06, 2010 | By Dawn Turner Trice

(Page 2 of 2)

"I was going to watch ESPN, but when I turned on the television, there was a news story about this kid who'd been in the Haiti earthquake (and had a spinal cord injury) and was relearning to walk," Williams said. "And this doctor had helped him."

The story was about 29-year-old Haitian earthquake victim Suy Bazelais, whom Dr. Daniel Ivankovich, a Chicago orthopedic surgeon, brought to the city in January to get world-class care. I had written about Bazelais' miraculous story months before when he arrived.

Williams said he knew Ivankovich looked familiar.

"We've both put on weight over the years, but it didn't occur to me until later who he was," Williams said. "Then it hit me. I said, 'That's Big Dan.' I e-mailed him, and he called me immediately."

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It turns out that Williams and the 7-foot-tall Ivankovich, who grew up in the suburbs, played basketball together as teens in all-star and all-America tournaments. Until that phone call in June, the two men hadn't spoken since 1981. Until they met, Williams had little to look forward to.

Ivankovich told me that he was careful not to get Williams' hopes up.

"When I admitted him into the hospital, I was happy to see that he could wiggle his toes," Ivankovich said. "I touched his legs, and he could feel it. But he was weak and hadn't stood up. No one had taken care of his (ingrown toenails), and I had to prepare his feet" so that he wouldn't get infections and he'd be ready to stand if he could."

Williams spent about five weeks at Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital and took his first step in August. He's been at the GlenCrest Nursing and Rehabilitation Centre for about a month and endures a grueling three hours a day of physical and occupational therapy, six days a week. Now he can take about 20 steps with a walker before he tires.

But because Williams is such a big man, Ivankovich has been trying to get a couple of companies to build robotic exoskeletons — think bionic leg braces — that Williams would attach to his legs to sustain walking over a longer distance. The technology initially was designed for soldiers to carry heavy loads in battle, but it has been used experimentally to help servicemen and women with spinal cord injuries.

"I owe all of this to Dan," Williams told me when I visited him at GlenCrest last week.

Williams said he wants young men to know what happens to shooting victims who don't die. He said no one has been arrested in his case.

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"Everybody has told me how lucky I am to be alive," Williams said. "But it changes everybody's life. Financially, it destroyed me. I'm in constant pain. I want to tell these punks they don't just shoot one person. This is a crime against the whole family. I don't know if it would make a difference if they could see that, but I sure want to make it my mission to try."

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