



Bob and Jody Johnston's son Harley was diagnosed with autism in 2005. Bob invented and marketed a floatation device in the pool for people with disabilities after seeing how Jody modified a life jacket to support Harley in a pool.

2 events, though 30 years apart, still go hand in hand

Injury in 20s guides man as he raises son

Bob Johnston says his life has been shaped by two events, one separated from the other by 30 years.

(If his name rings a bell, that's probably because of his great-grandfather, Robert A. Johnston founded one of Milwaukee's earliest industrial bakeries and with its proceeds built Marquette University's Johnston Hall.)

Bob was a natural athlete and a bit of a ski bum. In August 1975, when he was 22, Bob was walking between two parked cars on Milwaukee's east side. A driver rear-ended one of the cars and the impact crushed Bob's legs.

His left leg remained in a full-length cast for two months. His right leg, which doctors had considered amputating, remained in traction for three months, in a full-length cast for 14 months and in a full-length brace for six months more.

When Bob left the hospital and returned to the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, he discovered that the terrain of the ordinary world had changed.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was still more than a decade away. What he had not noticed before — stairs, broken sidewalks, remote parking spots — now loomed large. Bob struggled just to get into university buildings. He met with school administrators and advocated for ramps, elevators and other accommodations for disabled students.

"There just wasn't that general sort of understanding and acceptance of the challenges we all faced," he says. "It was pretty frustrating. You were kind of forced to make your way."

But Bob made his way. Four years after his accident, keeping a promise to a longtime friend, Bob skied Utah's Wasatch Mountains.

Bob would continue — and continues still — to struggle with his legs. Bone grafts from both hips. His right tibia and fibula have been rebuilt. Twice. His right knee and ankle have been replaced. This month, doctors will replace his left knee.



Bob Johnston's right leg, which doctors had considered amputating, remained in traction for three months, in a full-length cast for 14 months and in a full-length brace for six months more. Two events have shaped Johnston's life. His legs were crushed in a car accident in 1975. As a result, he became an advocate for those with disabilities. Then, 30 years later, his son was diagnosed with autism. He is now president of the Autism Society of Wisconsin.

But this had become his life. It wasn't always easy. He just did his best.

Over time, he could no longer ski. No longer run. Play basketball. Tennis. Losing those things, Bob says, broke his heart. But he pushed through them.

He took up biking. On a customized bike, he poured out his athletic soul. Then came the second life-altering event.

Bob and Jody Johnston's first child was born on Feb. 8, 2003. They named him Harley. Two years later, in 2005, Harley was diagnosed with autism.

"All of a sudden, our lives changed," Bob says.

Bob and Jody grieved. Their son would not have the life they had imagined. They would not be the family they had imagined. They would not be the parents they had imagined.

The terrain of their ordinary lives had changed, had become as fraught as the steps Bob had once stumbled over in his 20s.

In time, things fell into place. The accident. Harley's condition. They went hand in hand. One had prepared Bob for the other. One gave the other meaning.

"I didn't really start to understand the value of what I had gone through until Harley was born and diagnosed," Bob says.

"That's what got me to think: God put me through all this stuff and I learned a lot of lessons and I'm glad. But I never really understood why." Harley was why.

Bob adjusted his life accordingly.

Although he was a financial adviser, Bob had no idea how to plan for his son's financial future. As Bob schooled himself, he realized that the financial uncertainties that his family faced were shared by all families who have kids with special needs.

So he founded Special Needs Planning with the goal of helping those families through what can be dauntingly complex legal and financial issues.

He has also vested himself in the autism community and in 2016 was elected president of the Autism Society of Wisconsin.

These things have become Bob's calling.

"I don't know that I really understood the value of my life until I understood the value I bring to other people's lives," he says.