Against the Odds
Water Rescue Saves Petaluma Man’s Life

Former Harbor Patrol Agent Celebrates 10-Year Anniversary of Life-saving Transport

By Laura Kaufman

Growing up on Long Island, New York, Adam Dunn was always on the water, driving boats at age 8 and learning to rebuild them. When he was 18, he joined the Coast Guard, and later flew to Kodiak, AK to work as a boat mechanic. He also became a sea rescue diver, and worked on helicopter rescue missions.

Ironically, a CALSTAR rescue helicopter saved his life two decades later, when he served as a Federal Harbor Patrol Agent in Benicia, CA. A catastrophic dockside accident late one night changed his life forever.

On the night of February 8, 2005, Adam was heading to a pier in Benicia to pick up a patrol boat. The dock was dark that night, he recalls. Severe crosscurrents made it difficult for the boat operator to bring the craft in. In the dark, Adam tripped on a cleat, and pitched headfirst into the water. The worst-case scenario followed – the boat heading in crushed him against the dock not once, but several times. “The only reason he survived was his training,” recalls Adam’s wife, Wendy. “His Coast Guard rescue diver training helped him stay calm, slow his breathing, count, and ingest sea water for the gag reflex, forcing him to breathe. He saw a light coming toward him, and then had the thought ‘my wife would be so mad at me if I died,’ and he forced himself to come back.”

While he was floating, Adam suffered another unfortunate boat strike before he was pulled from the water by a Coast Guard crew. He was rescued with a dislocated arm, snapped clavicle,
cracked hips, broken ribs, and other injuries, including neurological damage from being underwater so long. CALSTAR was en route to the scene. It was now after 2 a.m. As Adam lay on the pier, the EMT responding said he had very little time – just a few minutes – left to survive the ordeal.

Luckily, a few minutes is all it took for CALSTAR to transport Adam to the trauma center at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek. “It literally was CALSTAR getting him there so fast that prevented Adam from dying,” says Wendy.

At the hospital, Adam’s dislocated shoulder was in front of his face. His injuries, including a traumatic brain injury and fluid in his lungs, required a two-and-a-half week stay, according to Wendy. He went home in a wheelchair, and started physical therapy. He has had multiple surgeries since, especially to his shoulder, and has become left-handed to work around his injuries. He has neurological damage and fights severe PTSD constantly.

A New Ally in Recovery
In the aftermath of the accident, a new connection became essential to Adam’s recovery: a special service dog, Reann. A physician had suggested getting a companion dog for Adam, and Wendy had friends who volunteered at Guide Dogs for the Blind. The couple took a tour and decided to volunteer as custodians for Reann, a breeder dog for the organization, who is also a service animal for Adam when she is not raising puppies. The human/canine relationship has been a huge support to Adam’s physical and emotional work. As Wendy relates, “Adam said that if it wasn’t for Reann, he wouldn’t be alive. She saved him from total despair” during recovery.

Wendy says the dog senses PTSD, and reacts immediately. One instance occurred on the beach in Bodega Bay, where the sound of a helicopter passing overhead put Adam into a state of panic. Reann immediately ran to his side to support and comfort him; he was briefly unable to walk.

Adam is now very proud to be part of Guide Dogs for the Blind, and the Dunns adopted one of Reann’s puppies, Bruno.

Bruno has grown into a large, sturdy dog who helps Adam with balance issues and other support as he continues living a life adapted to his injuries.

Looking Back After Ten Years
Adam, a former Coast Guard rescue swimmer himself, can recall being very impressed with the responders who helped him that night a decade ago. “I was out if it, but conscious, and was listening to what was going on. The procedure was at the forefront of my thoughts. I have been on water rescues, and was very impressed by the crew.”

Now 50, Adam says, “What’s hardest to handle about the whole incident is that I’m not who I was. I’ve had to modify pretty much everything I do.” He still has chronic pain, and though he is able to drive, he cannot ride a motorcycle nor participate in other sports.

The severity of the accident also affected his whole extended family, including the couple’s two children. What Adam is most proud of, he says, is his family and everything they’ve done for him. “Early on, they had to help me brush my teeth and get dressed. It was like raising a toddler again.”

Wendy is most proud of Adam’s remarkable perseverance against such odds. “He didn’t give up—he decided he was going to live. For someone to have that quality is pretty amazing. He’s a person who has a purpose in life.”

A Desire to Say Thank You
Adam wanted to touch base with the people who rescued him those years ago, hoping some might even see this newsletter.

“That night, I was aware of the people from CALSTAR – thank God they were there. They are the true meaning of ‘lifesavers.’ They got me to John Muir without a minute to spare; they timed it perfectly.”

He also has a message for others who may one day find themselves in a life-threatening situation: “Don’t give up. People don’t realize that their minds basically know how to keep them alive. You need to trust yourself – count on your gut. Your body wants to live, your mind keeps you alive.”

Adam Dunn is living proof of that advice ten years after his rescue. His training, courage, and perseverance – as well as human and canine support – have made him a remarkable success story.