

Fall 2007

## Former LAPD Officer Kristina Ripatti Finds a New Life Through Swim With Mike

Written By: Caroline Helper

Kristina Ripatti was an LAPD police officer who was shot while on duty patrolling with the Southwest Division's gang enforcement detail on June 3, 2006. In that moment, Ripatti was paralyzed from the chest down and her life was changed irrevocably.

With the unwavering support and unconditional love of her husband, Tim Pearce, who was the first one to find her after she was shot, and her 2-year-old daughter, Jordan, Ripatti has changed the course of her life and accomplished some very inspiring feats in the process.

She has thrown the opening pitch at Dodger Stadium, spoken at a women's conference hosted by Maria Shriver, where she met the Dalai Lama, pushed her wheelchair through the 2007 LAPD Memorial Run and walked the last 40 yards across the finish line in RGO braces a year after her injury. She has kept up surfing, a sport she has always enjoyed with her husband and which, she says, still gives her the same feeling. And all of this while being a mom to a toddler.

Ripatti is determined to change the course of her life and to forge for herself a life that is as valuable as, albeit different from, her life as a police officer.

"It's a hard thing to figure out when you think you know what you want to do and what you're going to be doing for the rest of your life and you're not in a position to do that," Ripatti said "So I just want to make the right decision and one I'm going to be happy with and get as much enjoyment as I did with police work."

And that's where Swim with Mike came along. Ripatti found out about the program from a police officer friend who had gone to USC and encouraged her to apply for the program.

"The Swim with Mike program came along and gave me an opportunity and a new direction to go and something else to look forward to doing and have some other kind of purpose, another career, and I wouldn't have had that opportunity without it," Ripatti said.



Ripatti has since become pregnant with her second child and having this baby is her current goal. The pregnancy forced her to defer her Swim with Mike scholarship for a year, until she can enroll in USC graduate school for either a Master's Degree in communication or law.

Although Ripatti's life may have taken an unexpected turn, it is a change she has met with a brave face and with incredible support. Ripatti stressed her amazement at all of the support she has received not only from her family and friends, but from her community in the South Bay area, as well. Her family was chosen to win a home renovation from the show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," and she was surprised to see all the people who came out to help.

"We were so touched by how much of themselves they gave to the project and to our family," Ripatti said "It kind of blew me away how much love there is out there when people are in need of it."

The love and support Ripatti has received has helped her to get through all of the tough times of the past year and she has learned a lot about not only her relationships with others, but also her relationship with herself.

"Before I would've just thought there's no way I have enough strength in me to do [this] but I think you realize that when you're faced with these situations you either do it or you don't - that's when you see how strong you can be," she said.

A lot of Ripatti's strength is reinforced by her family and friends who have shown her support she says she never would have imagined or expected. Ripatti said she has heard a lot of stories from people who were injured like her and whose spouses or boy friends or girl friends left them. She feels lucky that her husband, Tim, has pledged to her his unconditional love and support.

Ripatti's passion for police work has carried over into a commitment to furthering her education and doing as much good for her community through her degree as she did while working as a police officer.

# SEVERE INJURY WON'T STOP ALEX JOHNSON: ATTENDING USC'S MARSHALL SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ENJOYING THE L.A. WEATHER

Written By: Caroline Helper



***New Recipient  
Alex Johnson***

Alex Johnson has not only managed to get out of the small town of Fargo, North Dakota, where he grew up, but he has also managed to get far.

“We called it a drinking town with a football problem,” Alex Johnson said of the place he grew up. “Our town is a sports town and was mainly a big football town.” Johnson was an athlete in football, wrestling, and track in high school until his accident at the age of 16.

Johnson was injured while participating in a wild horse bareback competition as part of a rodeo. He incurred a spinal cord injury at the C5-C6 level and is now a quadriplegic.

However, Johnson’s injury didn’t get in the way of his finishing high school and earning an Eagle Scout rank. After high school, Johnson and his family, who owns and operates a 3,000-acre farm, moved to San Diego so Alex could participate in Project Walk. At Project Walk Johnson met other Swim with Mike recipients and board member Mike Thomas, who made him aware of the program and encouraged him to apply.

Johnson is now a junior at USC’s Marshall School of Business and has plans to go to law school where he will prepare to go into corporate or business law. Johnson said he wouldn’t mind sticking around USC for a few more years of law school after he finishes his undergraduate work.

“I like it here, I like the weather, you can’t beat it,” he said. “This is a good place, a good area.” Johnson’s life has obviously changed dramatically since his accident – he’s not only gone from living in a small town of about 1,000 people to the thriving metropolis of Los Angeles, but he’s also had to overcome the adversities of his accident.

“The whole independence issue, you’re not as free as you used to be obviously but you work around it,” he said. Johnson went on to acknowledge all the help that Swim with Mike has given him.

“I went to the Swim last year and met a lot of people and I went to the banquet and that part has been a pretty easy transition and a really good help,” he said “And I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for SWM and that scholarship.”

Johnson said he is grateful for the opportunities that being a SWM recipient has afforded him, giving him the chance to not only get out of his small town but opening up a world of possibilities he had never imagined in high school.

“There’s nothing there, everything is the same and people change but everything is the same and most people are still there, they never get out,” he said. With that said, Johnson has already managed to get out of his small town, get some valuable life experience, and has plans for a bright future.

# JOE JACKSON: DISABLED ATHLETE MOVES ON AT ASU

Written By: Caroline Helper

Joe Jackson has always had a passion for fixing things, but his attitude is something that has never needed any adjustment.

“There was never a point at which I wanted to give up,” he said, “because I wasn’t raised that way and my friends and family supported me 100 percent.” Jackson was injured in November of 2005 during a football practice and has to use a wheelchair to get around these days.

“The hardest thing to overcome in the beginning was thinking what people thought of me now that I’m confined to a wheelchair,” Jackson said “But once I went out and experienced my new lifestyle, everything got better and I moved on.”

Jackson has just started his freshman year at Arizona State University and plans to major in electrical engineering. Although he said his life at college is very different from his life in high school, he is enjoying it.

“I like living on campus in the dorms because my classes aren’t too far away and everything I need is right there,” he said.

In high school, besides football, Jackson participated in wrestling and track and field. However, since his accident, ever the competitor, he has picked up a new sport: wheelchair rugby, and even traveled to Kentucky with the Phoenix Heat to play in a national tournament.

Family and friends have meant a lot to Jackson his whole life, but especially since his accident.

“My relationships with my friends and family are much stronger now,” he said. Jackson, who found out about Swim with Mike through a mentor who went to USC, and has in turn become a peer mentor at St. Joseph’s Hospital. Jackson has gone so far as to start a foundation with his father to get equipment to kids under 18 who need it. Jackson’s positive attitude and enthusiasm towards giving back to his community help to make him a valued member of the Swim with Mike family.

Jackson encouraged people to visit his new foundation at [www.joejacksonfoundation.org](http://www.joejacksonfoundation.org).



*New Recipient  
Joe Jackson*



*Pete Carroll, Mike Nyeholt, and Will Ferrell post “Carroll vs. Ferrell Challenge”*



*Last Year’s Recipients*

In addition to these new recipients, the following is a full run down of all our current scholarship recipients.

## •2007 - 2008 Swim With Mike Recipients•

### NEW USC Students

<b>Name</b>	<b>Accident/Illness</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>School/Major/Year</b>
<b>Alex Johnson</b> <i>Lake San Marcos, CA</i>	Injury during rodeo competition Quadriplegic	Rodeo, football, wrestling, track, skiing	USC - Marshall School of Business/ Junior
<b>Kristina Ripatti</b>	LAPD officer who was shot and paralyzed while patrolling with the Southwest Division's gang enforcement detail on June 3, 2006 Paralyzed from chest down	Soccer	USC - Graduate School; deferring to Fall '08

### Returning USC Students

<b>Name</b>	<b>Accident/Illness</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>School/Major/Year</b>
<b>Robert Brooks</b> <i>Seal Beach, CA</i>	Amputee	Basketball, skiing, body boarding	USC - Graduate School
<b>Chris Cantwell</b> <i>Chino Hills, CA</i>	Diving accident, quadriplegic	Swimming, water polo	USC - PhD Physics
<b>Donald Hammond</b> <i>San Pedro, CA</i>	Motorcycle accident; left leg paralysis	Football, wrestling, track	USC Law School/2nd year
<b>Chad Hendrickson</b> <i>Cerritos, CA</i>	Beach accident, quadriplegic	Swimming, water polo	USC - Masters/Construction Engineering
<b>Brandon Johnson</b> <i>Colorado Springs, CO</i>	Gym accident, suffered a C5-6 spinal cord injury (quadriplegic with some limited movement in his shoulders and arms)	Football	USC - Psychology, Pre-Med/Junior
<b>Michael McNamara</b> <i>Culver City, CA</i>	Sports accident, paraplegic	Basketball	USC - Sociology Major, Music Recording Minor/Junior
<b>Rocky Paneno</b> <i>Glendale, CA</i>	Railing collapsed, fell six stories and was in a coma for two weeks; paraplegic	Football, gymnastics, track	USC - Mathematics/Junior
<b>Joey Pulford</b> <i>Redondo Beach, CA</i>	Beach accident, quadriplegic	Water polo, swimming	USC - Graduate School/Planning
<b>Tyler Warnock</b> <i>Lucerne Valley, CA</i>	Car accident, Paraplegic	Baseball	USC - Sociology/Junior
<b>Jeff Wood</b> <i>El Cajon, CA</i>	Leber's Disease, a rare mitochondria disease. Blind 20/800 vision	Track, baseball-currently on the USC Track Team	USC - Kinesiology (Busines Administration minor)/Junior

### NEW National Recipients

<b>Name</b>	<b>Accident/Illness</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>School/Major/Year</b>
<b>Michael Dieringer</b> <i>Albion, MI</i>	Motorcycle accident C5-6 quadriplegic	Golf, baseball, tennis, soccer	Spring Arbor - Engineering /Freshman

<b>Thomas Haig</b> <i>Pullman, WA</i>	Haig collided with a 14-foot truck while cycling. T-12 paraplegic	Diving, Handcycling	Washington State - Broadcast Journalism/Senior
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<b>Joseph Jackson</b> <i>Chandler, AZ</i>	In 2005 Jackson was tackled while playing defense as a strong safety. He was airlifted off the field. C6 Spinal Cord Injury	Football, wrestling, track	Arizona State - Electrical Engineering/Freshman
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<b>Eric Stanton</b> <i>St. Thomas, U.S.V.I</i>	Injury from fall off a cliff. C-6-7 Spinal Cord Injury/quadruplegic	Football, basketball, baseball	Barry University - Business/Sophomore
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### Returning National Students

<b>Name</b>	<b>Accident/Illness</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>School/Major/Year</b>
<b>Joseph Broc</b> <i>Haleiwa, HI</i>	Spina Bifida - myelomeningocele, below the knee paralysis, uses wheelchair	Outrigger canoe paddling	Hawaii Pacific Univ. - ommunications/Sophomore

<b>Tricia Downing</b> <i>Denver, CO</i>	Hit by a car while cycling training, T-4 paralysis (paralyzed from the chest down)	Gymnastics, diving, cycling, triathlon	Regis University - Nonprofit Management /3rd Year Graduate
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<b>Kenneth Gibson</b> <i>Diamond Bar, CA</i>	Football accident, paralyzed and unable to walk or write	Football, track	CSU Fullerton - Undeclared/Sophomore
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<b>Colin Heffern</b> <i>Cheyenne, WY</i>	C-4 Spinal Cord Injury no functional movement below Shoulders	Tennis, golf, swimming, soccer	Colorado St. - Landscape Architecture/Junior-Year three of five
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<b>Joe Kay</b> <i>Tucson, AZ</i>	Carotid artery was torn during post game fan celebration; suffered a stroke, which left him with hemiplegia (paralysis o one side) and aphasia (loss of language)	Basketball, volleyball	Stanford University - American Studies/Junior
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<b>Fulutusi Mailo</b> <i>Kahuku, HI</i>	Beach accident, quadriplegic	Football	BYU-Hawaii – Mathematics/Senior
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<b>Ellie O'Neill</b> <i>Canton, NY</i>	Fell from 3rd floor of building, paraplegic from the waist down	Soccer, basketball, lacrosse, track, tennis, softball, crew	Syracuse University - Entrepreneurship & Emerging Enterprises/Junior
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<b>Taylor Price</b> <i>Ridgewood, NJ</i>	Beach accident, quadriplegic	Tennis, golf	Georgetown - Marketing/Finance/Junior
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<b>John Tartaglio</b> <i>Milford, Conn.</i>	Bilateral hip disarticulation when he contracted a rare bacterial infection in high school; both legs were amputated at the hip.	Football, baseball; Has taken up swimming and competes in open water races	Fairfield University – Pre-Med/Junior
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<b>David Van Wagener</b> <i>Greenwood Village, CO</i>	Skiing accident, quadriplegic	Skiing	University of Texas – Graduate school/Engineering
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<b>Joseph Zinski</b> <i>Voorhees, NJ</i>	Dove into shallow pool, C-6 quadriplegic-Asia A, no sensation below chest, no movement waist down	Swimming, soccer, baseball	University of Connecticut - Chemical Engineering/Junior
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# VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

## BILL STOEPPELMAN AND THE LATE TOM LAVELLE

Written By: Caroline Helper



**Bill Stoepelman**

Bill Stoepelman has been in the Swim with Mike family for 20 years donating his services in the printing business and attending the annual swims.

He has been around to see Swim with Mike hit many milestones over the years. Having been a part of SWM since its very earliest years, Stoepelman witnessed, first hand, how much it has grown over the past 20 years – going from the \$30,000 and \$40,000 marks all the way up past the \$100,000 mark and beyond.

“Seeing all the good that it does and seeing how it’s grown,” he said, “I think the amazing thing is that has become national [...] and now they’re hitting the million dollar mark, it is just crazy!”

Stoepelman went on to say that he has returned year after year because he believes in making scholarship money available to athletes who have been injured and he enjoys playing a part in supporting such a good cause.

“It’s just the feel good thing of being involved,” he said, “and Ron and Mike have done such a wonderful job with this thing that my wife and I really believe it’s a great thing.”

Stoepelman also talked about his friend, Tom Lavelle, who passed away this past September and was also involved for many years with Swim with Mike. Lavelle was a top graphic artist and illustrator who came up with the overall look of the posters and the mailers each year and helped to develop the SWM logo.

“Tom got involved in it because number one, he loved the challenge of coming up with an idea that would tie in with the whole concept of SWM and he got really excited in that area as well as all the good that it does,” said Stoepelman. He went on to say that Lavelle loved the challenge of coming up with a new idea every year that was in the same vein as what had been done in the past year.

Stoepelman said he plans on absolutely continuing his support for SWM and that he looks forward to being involved and attending this year’s swim.



**Tom Lavelle**

### Swim With Mike’s Mission Statement

*To provide financial resources for advanced education that paves the way for physically challenged athletes to overcome their tragedies and realize their full potential.*

# SWIM WITH MIKE FOUNDERS RON ORR AND MIKE NYEHOLT HOPE TO EXCEED \$1 MILLION IN 2008

Written By: Caroline Helper



**Ron Orr**

Swim with Mike is diving into its 28th year with hopes of not only matching but surpassing the groundbreaking \$1 million raised last year. Swim with Mike has come a long way over the years, having gone from what was intended to be a one-time gig into a full fledged scholarship fund that has touched lives of disabled athletes across the country and beyond.

“I saw someone in a Swim with Mike shirt at the Geneva Airport,” said Mike Nyeholt, who is almost incredulous over Swim with Mike’s growing success. “Obviously we are thrilled and overwhelmed with the success of the event over the years,” he said, “It’s hard to believe that what we thought was going to be a one time event has been so successful and touched so many lives.”

This year, Swim with Mike will distribute an unprecedented \$660,000 to 26 recipients at USC and 16 other universities spanning the country from Syracuse University in upstate New York to Hawaii Pacific University. As of this year, Swim with Mike has raised a total of \$7.5 million for 69 recipients at USC and 20 other universities nationally.

Nyeholt emphasized the program’s importance as a way to help recipients integrate back into a mainstream life by helping to build their self-esteem at a time when their lives have had a traumatic turnaround – going from being 100% physically capable to being physically challenged.

“What we do is important because it’s about self-esteem and helping our recipients to regain their independence and to be able to take care of themselves,” said Nyeholt “And education is the most important thing.”

Ron Orr, who started the program with Nyeholt, agreed.

“For me, graduation days are always really inspiring and satisfying,” Orr said “These young people make me proud!”

With the weight of these important goals driving the program forward, Swim with Mike wants to keep up the momentum and drive the program even harder and further.

“Our number one goal is to grow in every direction,” said Orr “And to do better every year is key.” Orr and Nyeholt have begun encouraging Swim with Mike to not only grow, but also to move out and away from USC - for instance, the satellite swim in Hawaii is entering its fourth year. According to Orr, people are interested in starting satellite Swim with Mike funds at Georgetown University in Washington D.C and up the coast at Stanford University.

“Thank you to everyone for all of the support. This is not about the individual – not about the donors and recipients, it’s all about the Swim with Mike Family that has supported us over the years and who continue to support us,” Nyeholt said.



**Mike Nyeholt after swimming his laps**

# Save the Dates:

**April 12th, 2008**

**28<sup>th</sup> Annual Swim With Mike USC**

**April 19th, 2008**

**4<sup>th</sup> Annual Swim With Mike Hawaii**  
**swimwithmikehi@hotmail.com**



**May 10th, 2008**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Swim With Mike Stanford**

**Happy Holidays**  
**from the Swim With Mike Family!**  
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