



STAND UP AND BE SEEN



In his inspirational memoir, John Robinson '90 reflects on his days as an SU student and the challenges he took on as a congenital amputee

BY JOHN ROBINSON WITH DAVE ALLEN

Editor's Note:

*John Robinson, a 1990 graduate of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, was born with half arms and shortened legs, a physical disability known as congenital limb loss. His life has never been simple; yet, in challenge after challenge, he has succeeded. In *Get Off Your Knees: A Story of Faith, Courage, and Determination* (published last fall by Syracuse University Press) and a companion documentary by the same name released by PBS, Robinson recounts his fascinating, inspirational life story. Following is an excerpt in which he recalls his days here at Syracuse University.*

MOST HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS RECEIVE WORD OF THEIR future college destination via the mail, usually in the form of a very large envelope. I was pulled out of assembly and told I had been accepted to Syracuse University. I'm sure my dad's cousin Daniel Willett, who was an administrator at Syracuse at the time, had something to do with the phone call, because it was no secret in my family how badly I wanted to attend Syracuse. My mom's family was from nearby LaFayette, my uncle Douglas went to SU, and like anyone who grew up in Central New York, I bled Orange basketball and football. It didn't hurt that SU had one of the best communications schools in the country, either, because I knew early on that I wanted to pursue a career in television.

I coveted Syracuse for all of those reasons, and because it's a large school. I didn't seek out a small, intimate campus; I wanted a place that would push and prepare me for the real world, not one that would continue to accommodate my disability. In high school my classes were moved to one floor, when possible, so I wouldn't have to walk the stairs, someone would carry my books from class to class, and the assistant headmaster assisted me in the bathroom. I was pampered. I needed to be challenged by my new surroundings, because certainly the real world wasn't going to be as obliging. For this reason, I couldn't wait to get to Syracuse and gain my independence. I was dependent on others for so long—for eating, getting dressed, going to the bathroom—and I didn't want to live that way anymore. I frequently asked for help, but I hated to do so. Syracuse was my opportunity to stand alone and see



if I could make it on my own. ...

The first few weeks were like an episode of *The Amazing Race*. There were challenges at seemingly every turn, but I took them on one at a time. First, I wanted to see if I could get through a full day, then a week, then my first test, and so on. With each passing day, I gained more and more confidence in myself that I could survive on my own.

My biggest physical challenge was getting around from class to class. That first semester, I lost 15 pounds. While most first-year students were packing on the "freshman 15," I was shedding pounds like a wrestler trying to make weight. In the Hall of Languages, one of the older buildings on campus where I had classes, I couldn't reach the buttons on the elevator so I had to walk up and down several flights of stairs; it was either that or wait for someone else who could reach the buttons. There were stairs everywhere, not to mention one steep hill I had to navigate from the Hall of Languages to the Schine Student Center, where I worked part-time at the student orga-

nization desk. When there was snow or ice on the sidewalks and steps, things got a bit tricky. ...

The first few weeks would answer the questions I had as to whether I could get around and exist on my own. I could. But I still hadn't addressed my other great fear, which was whether I could make new friends. It was very difficult at first. I had been spoiled by a high school, church, and family that provided me special treatment, and here was a new group of people not ready to hand me friendship because I asked for it. I had to earn it.

I was not the center of attention at Syracuse, as I was in high school or at home. I had to find my way to class and stand in line for the dining hall just like every other student. For the first time, I felt like I stood on merit with my peers. But I was still different. I was so busy trying to figure out who I was that I did not realize the other students needed a transition period to get used to me. Not everyone is excited to welcome someone with differences into their own lives. I had made a few



To watch an interview with John Robinson, go to sumagazine.syr.edu.



John Robinson '90 pushes his tricycle down a street in Greene, New York, where he lived until seventh grade.

Robinson sits behind the wheel of his Chevy Citation that he drove during his college days at SU.

Robinson and college friends gather at Patrick Kelleher's wedding in 1996. Back row (left to right): Paul Golden '90, Robert Aronow '90, Pat Kelleher '90, Scott Roegiers '91; front row: Dave Allen '90, John Robinson '90.



friends in my dormitory with whom I shared things in common, but others were still very leery of me.

I lived on the first floor of Sadler Hall my freshman and sophomore years at SU. ... My roommate freshman year hailed from northern California. Roberto and I spoke on the phone a month before I arrived on campus, which is a common occurrence with most incoming freshmen. But I did not tell Roberto of my physical disability, and when he walked in the door his first day at Syracuse he was caught off guard. Roberto put on a good face for the first few days as my roommate, but then spent more and more time in another dorm. Not long after freshman orientation, Roberto came to the room and said he was uncomfortable living with me. He wanted to transfer to a new dorm. I was rejected two weeks into my college life.

I was very upset. I expected to have a roommate and a new friend, as all incoming freshmen do; instead, I was living in my own bedroom, and I didn't know a soul. I spent a lot of time exploring campus, driving my car, working in the student center, and studying. I can remember writing a letter to a friend of mine from high school, telling her about Roberto's rejection and how I couldn't understand why someone would feel that uncomfortable around me. She told me to forget about it. "That's his loss, not yours," she said.

One positive that came out of Roberto's departure was that I had my own room. I was the envy of every freshman in Sadler because I had some freedom other kids weren't able to have—and my own bathroom. This freedom eventually allowed me to find new friends.

I struck up several friendships with my neighbors on the West Wing of Sadler 1. Jivi Govender lived across the hall along with Yardley Drake Buckman. For some reason Yardley,





John Robinson '90 prepares to hit his first tee shot at Doonbeg Golf Club in Ireland in August 2007.

who hailed from Florida, didn't know how cold it got in Syracuse, and he brought only a light jacket with him. He stuck it out for a long time with that jacket, too. Jivi was Indian by way of South Africa and was raised in a small town next to Greene [New York], where I lived until the seventh grade. We shared some acquaintances. We'd stay up late, listen to music, and talk about girls. When relatives called him, he would hold the phone up to my ear so I could hear the accents from South Africa. We had a great freshman year getting to know each other and would share a dorm suite our junior year with two other friends, both of whom lived on Sadler 1 our freshman year. ...

In my second year at Syracuse, I started to become more comfortable. I was less worried about who liked me and for what reason. I had a great friendship with Craig [Hubmeier], who had moved to the seventh floor at Sadler, and did not need to try as hard to be noticed. Most of the other guys from Sadler 1 during freshman year, whom I had alienated by acting like a jerk, lived just across the street at Stadium Place. The guys asked if Craig and I would like to join a fantasy baseball league, and we gladly accepted, which helped bring us all a lot closer.

My single room, held over from freshman year, soon became one of our meeting places, but not so much for the league as for the cable TV box that was installed at the start of the semester. Sadler was one of the first dorms to get hooked up (Stadium wasn't so lucky), so my room was suddenly as popular a destination as the bars on Marshall Street. ... We watched a lot of baseball, basketball, and, of course, hockey, especially at play-off time.

Although my new friends helped me acclimate to life as a student, there were still times my disability was projected back to me like a mirror. One night, Craig, Dave [Allen], and I were filing out of a nightclub called Braggs. Craig is 6-foot-1

and Dave 6-foot-3, so I was a sight standing between the two of them. The place was packed with people—I'm sure they broke every fire code in Syracuse—and it was slow getting out of there. The bouncer wouldn't let anybody into the club until a certain number of people left, and the people waiting in line were getting restless. Suddenly, one woman in line looked down at me (she had probably had a few too many already) and yelled for everyone to hear, "If you'd just get off your knees, this line would move a lot faster!" Well, my two friends thought that was the funniest thing they had ever heard and laughed hysterically. They couldn't wait to get back and tell everyone what they heard.

It's never fun to be laughed at, but having found new friends who understood me far outweighed any discomfort I may have felt by the woman's insulting me. The person I was in high school would have dwelled on the fact that someone saw me as a person with a disability first. It took many days and nights of reflection to realize that what's important are the friends I have made, not the people who stare at me.

There were many times in high school when I chose not to push myself, because I didn't have the self-confidence I would later exude at Syracuse. It was very difficult to grow up with 40 brothers and sisters in such a small graduating class at prep school because there was no need to challenge myself or test new relationships. I felt as if I were in some tiny, sheltered cocoon. I am thankful every day for that education, but it's the life skills I received at Syracuse University that truly made me the person I am today.

First and foremost among those life skills was the self-confidence I gained by proving to myself that I could be independent. I may choose to have other people help me from time to time, but I don't need anyone else to live. I learned to adapt to situations I was shielded from prior to college, which improved my mobility and problem-solving skills. I chose to work hard. It's what my parents wanted for me, and it's what I wanted from myself. I always wanted to have a family, a nice car, and a dream home, but it wasn't until I stood on my own and got off my knees that I realized I could achieve those things.

To me, getting off my knees means hard work. I tell myself I need to work twice as hard to climb up in a chair, to buy groceries, to dress my children. It takes me 25 minutes to get my son Owen into his hockey gear. And then I have to ask someone else to help him with his skates. How long does it take you to dress your child? I need to push myself. This mind-set is what I use every day. If I tell myself I need to work twice as hard to be the equal of others, then I will.

John Robinson is the director of corporate support for WMHT, the public broadcasting station in Albany, where he lives with his wife and three children. A lifelong Boston Bruins hockey fan, he is also an avid golfer and continues to enjoy the company of longtime friends from his time at SU, including Dave Allen '90, who co-wrote the book with him.