



Maria R. Reyes, M.D., Res. '94, and volunteer Kyle Samek assist Joseph Preti in building upper-body strength. "I've definitely gotten stronger," Preti says. For people like Preti, says Reyes, UW Medicine's new post-spinal cord injury rehabilitation program, Transitions, helps ease the shift back into family and community life.

A Valuable Life

Every year, more than 12,000 people in the United States suffer a spinal cord injury (SCI). And in one instant, their lives are forever changed.

Severe SCI can cause temporary or permanent paralysis, and appropriate rehabilitative care is often part of the treatment for injured patients. After that, however, making the transition from hospital-based care to daily life at home, at work and in the community can be a very hard road.

UW Medicine's SCI Rehabilitation Core Group had ambitious, innovative ideas for a post-rehabilitative care program for people with SCI, says Maria R. (Rina) Reyes, M.D., Res. '94, UW assistant professor in the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine and medical director of the UW Medicine SCI Rehabilitation Program, "but we didn't have any funding to make it happen."

Enter several generous supporters. The Craig H. Neilsen Foundation awarded a competitive grant in support of the proposed program. And, after winning a personal injury settlement for Kenneth (Kenny) Salvini — a young man rendered quadriplegic after a terrible accident at a ski resort — attorneys John R. Connelly, Jr., and James W. Beck committed to a matching gift in Salvini's honor. The gifts were made through their firms, Connelly Law Offices and Gordon Thomas Honeywell, LLP, respectively.

"Kenny is an extraordinary young man, and we wanted to do something on his behalf that would help other people in the same circumstances realize that they could go on and lead a valuable life," says Connelly.

"He has such an unusually supportive network of family," Beck adds. "It made a lot of sense for us to do something that would acknowledge all the people out there that don't have the same support network that Kenny has."

These gifts allowed the launch of UW Medicine's Transitions Health Maintenance and Wellness Program ("Transitions") in February 2011. Transitions gives patients access to post-rehabilitative services during their first two years after injury — a critical time for maintaining and building on the level of activity set during in-hospital rehabilitation. Without post-rehabilitation services, activity typically drops precipitously after a patient is discharged.

"Transitions promotes lifelong wellness, independence and participation by introducing and encouraging healthful practices," explains Reyes, who directs the program and witnesses firsthand the progress made by its participants.

The individualized program — with activities taking place at UW Medical Center and Harborview Medical Center — includes an educational series on health and pain-management strate-

gies as well as counseling services. It also provides opportunities for patients to participate in supervised, adapted exercise, join community recreation programs, master adapted driving skills, and use computers to explore work options. These resources are invaluable for patients struggling to create a new "normal" after SCI.

Ray Neilsen, chair of the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation, says that Transitions' goals align strongly with the foundation's mission.

"The Craig H. Neilsen Foundation supports research to find a cure for spinal cord injuries and programs to improve the quality of life for those living with SCI," says Neilsen. "We're pleased to partner with the University of Washington in launching its innovative rehabilitation program, Transitions. We believe this program will offer wonderful opportunities for those living with SCI."

One patient who appreciates these opportunities is Joseph Preti, paralyzed from the chest down after an accident in October 2010. Thanks to Transitions, Preti has learned to drive with hand controls, and he now drives himself from Port Angeles to Seattle twice a week for his sessions. Although his wife still needs to help with the wheelchair restraints, being able to drive gives him a feeling of independence, he says. "It's a real benefit to me."