

SPORTING PEOPLE



ANTHONY AGOSTINO

Willard's return an inspiration

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO WHEN gym owner Dave Willard returned to his downtown Kingston fitness gym in a wheelchair, he felt like he didn't belong.

But after he received a few compliments and heard the sound of the iron weights clanging, he felt like he was home again.

In 1990, Willard was in a farm accident that would change his life forever: A 700-pound bail of hay flew off a front-end loader and landed on him, breaking his back and leaving him paralysed from the chest down.

"The gym showed me I could get back out into the world ... so that way, it has been a confidence builder for me personally," said the new owner of Next Generation Fitness.

It has been a long and hard road back for the man who owns a brown belt in karate and is a former amateur wrestler. Being confined to a wheelchair did much more than just physically maim him.

"It took me about six years to recover emotionally," said Willard.

In the mid-80s, Willard owned gyms in Kingston - in the exact same location he is at now - and Belleville.

But he left the business he loved to return to his farm to start a family and work as a sheep shearer, as he had done since he was 14 years old.

Thoughts of the gym disappeared for a while after his accident.

But after a lot of wondering and doubting, he decided to return to the business he desperately missed, and bought back the Princess Street gym formerly known as Superior Nautilus.

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"I had always missed the Kingston gym in particular. I missed a lot of the people."

The return of the burly, soft-spoken man to the fitness industry meant much more than a reappearance in the weight room.

"The gym has reinforced that some type of internal healing has taken place, psychologically, spiritually, emotionally. I feel whole again in those regards, by and large."

As the owner of Kingston's first Nautilus gym, 13 years ago, Willard has always been on the cutting edge of the fitness industry.

"We always aim to have the most serious, functional and efficient equipment in town. Equipment was always the key element, not a juice bar or a whirlpool."

Through renovations, Willard has incorporated a new and improved line of Nautilus equipment into the gym along with an upgrade in cardiovascular machinery. He has also had the gym layout remodeled.

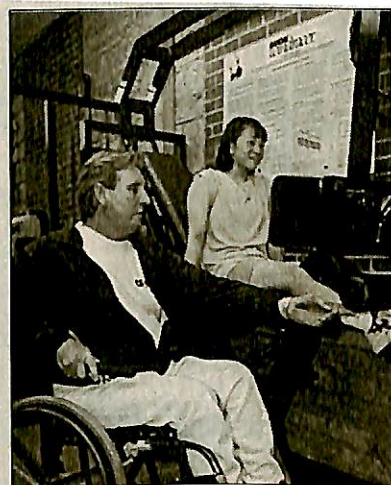
"We wanted a more open and inviting concept. People walk in now and they feel like training."

Of course, being the owner has its benefits. While Willard ordered the new equipment primarily for its technology, he was also thinking of himself.

"I can access several of the machines with a slideboard quite easily" said Willard, who currently trains with dumbbells on a bed, and sometimes in his wheelchair.

"I'm no superstar, I just like to train and be fit," he said. "At least I had an opportunity to come back and finish what I started. You don't usually get opportunities like that."

A superstar? Maybe not. An inspiration? Definitely.



WILLARD: Returns to first love