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Man who hurt spinal cord twice will take another 'victory lap' up tower

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Mark Block's voice echoed through the stairwell.

"I feel alive! Oh, so alive!"
 Trekking up Omaha's tallest building was a win for the Ankeny, Iowa, man.

Last year, Block was back in the city for the first time since suffering his second spinal cord injury. Before the 2009 accident, he was prepping for a work trip to the

Omaha area.
 "It was like a victory lap," Block said. "I got hurt and I was down, but now I'm back. Tragedies can turn into triumphs, and that's what happened that day."

Block will be back at the First National Tower this month for a second go at climbing the 45-story building. He won't just climb it once. He will attempt to climb a vertical mile, which means stomping up the tower 10½ times.

Block, 53, will sport a wrap below

TREK UP THE TOWER

his left knee that helps stimulate his muscles. His right hand will grip the railing. And he will move his feet one at a time. Left. Right. Left. Right. If he loses focus, he will fall.

Organizers expect between 1,700 and 2,000 people to tackle the downtown Omaha tower's 45 floors. The trek sees a mix of average athletes and elite climbers. For many, it's a symbol of what they can accomplish.

Block has always been an athlete.

He ran track and cross country in

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When: 7 a.m. Feb. 16

Where: First National Tower, 1620 Dodge St.

Registration: Closes at noon Wednesday

Cost: \$60 for a single climb; \$145 for a vertical mile; \$125 for unlimited climbs

Information: trekupthetower.org

Trek: Therapist says man 'embodies the can-do spirit'

bump in the road. It sent the car into a ditch, where it rolled several times. The roof of the car caved in.

Block had broken his neck. When he woke up from a coma, he was paralyzed from the neck down.

After about a month, he regained feeling in his right foot. He could wiggle his toes. Feeling started to creep up his body, leaving him with a painful pins-and-needles sensation as it returned.

He worked his way up to using wheelchairs and then standing on his own. By the time Block was discharged, he was able to walk out wearing a brace on his leg, supported by his parents and a cane.

Twenty years after his injury, Block was able to walk unaided. He held a job selling medical supplies in Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota.

In 2009, he was preparing for a work trip to Omaha. He was shuffling boxes around the garage and loading the car when he tripped. His head hit the car. He felt a shock, "kind of a zinger," go through his body. When things didn't get better, Block drove himself to the emergency room.

Doctors told him that he had a spinal cord injury.

"I'd been through this before; I know how devastating it can be," Block said. "I was like, 'No, I don't

want to go back to this again.' I was scared."

The second injury didn't paralyze Block, but he was left with impairment in all four limbs. The injury also left him with a condition that affects his heart rate, blood pressure and breathing.

He went to a rehabilitation facility to learn how to manage his reflexes and learn his boundaries. There, he learned about stair climbs.

Block participated in a stair climb at Chicago's Willis Tower. It's 110 stories and 1,730 feet high, including antennae. The First National Tower in Omaha is 45 stories and 634 feet high. Still new in his rehab process, he participated on a hand cycle rather than climbing the stairs. But he was determined to learn to climb safely.

Because he struggles with extreme muscle tightness, particularly on his left side, Block learned to grasp the handrail. He has to focus on putting one foot in front of the other during a climb.

He's since been back for eight stair climbs at the Chicago building. He's done about 30 stair climbs total.

Block hasn't let his injuries hold him back, said Colleen Stovesand, a physical therapist who worked with him. Stovesand has completed a handful of climbs with Block.

"Mark embodies the can-do spirit more than anyone I know," she said. "He's out there motivating others. The stair climbs, for him, are an opportunity to uplift other people he meets in there. He's really an incredible person to turn something tragic and difficult into such a positive thing."

Block hopes to be one of the first in the stairwell and one of the last out at the Omaha event on Feb. 16. Trek Up the Tower is a fundraiser for Wellcom, a nonprofit dedicated to improving work-site wellness.

The First National Tower is the city's tallest building and offers a sweeping view of downtown Omaha.

First responders will kick off the climb. Once they're through, runners will start the climb. A new wave of runners is sent up every few seconds to avoid clogging the stairwell.

"It's a really neat event because anyone can do it," said Chantelle Green, program and communications director for Wellcom. "You just have to pick your own pace and find what works for you."

Block is proof of that. "It's not just about my climb anymore," he said. "It feels good to help other people."

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MARK BLOCK

Mark Block completes a stair climb. The Ankeny, Iowa, man will tackle Trek Up the Tower on Feb. 16. It will be his second time at the event.

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high school. But he was sidelined for the first time in the late 1980s when he was 20 years old.

On his drive home, Block hit a