

For W Mitchell, tragedy was a starting point

The Man Who Won't Be Defeated

W Mitchell with Hannibal in Colorado's Genesee Park.

IN HIS WHEELCHAIR, W MITCHELL rolls into a fashionable Denver restaurant, grins and waves his fingerless hand at the bartender. The other patrons try not to stare.

Mitchell's face is a patchwork of multicolored skin grafts, the fingers of both hands are either missing or mere stubs, and his paralyzed legs lie thin and useless in his blue corduroy slacks.

No one here is bold enough to ask, but Mitchell says people sometimes try to guess how he was injured. Car wreck? Vietnam? The real story is more astounding than anyone could guess. Mitchell, 46, was horrifically burned and nearly killed in a freak motorcycling accident in 1971; then, four years later, he was paralyzed from the waist down in an airplane crash. "When I tell people there were two separate accidents," he says, "they can hardly stand it."

Yet Mitchell is a millionaire, a respected environmentalist, a sought-after speaker, a former mayor and Congressional candidate, even a river-rafter and sky-diver. And he became all these things **after** his accidents.

His life, Mitchell says, proves that "all limitations are self-imposed." He adds, "It's not what happens to you in life, it's what you do about it."

Mitchell had always enjoyed forging his own destiny. He even chose his own name. Born William John Schiff in Wallingford, Pa., he decided in 1968 to change it legally to "Mitchell" in honor of his late stepfather, Luke Mitchell. "The Social Security Administration said it would blow a computer if I just had one name," he recalls, "so I stuck the 'W' on the front.

He dropped out of high school in the 10th grade and joined the Marines. While in the service, he got his high school equivalency diploma. After his four-year hitch, he bounced between jobs: radio announcer, bartender, cabdriver, part-time college student. In 1969, he became a San Francisco cable-car gripman, cutting



Stephen Culler for

Ness, a laundry truck and I collided. The bike went down, crushed my elbow and fractured my pelvis, and the gas cap popped open on the motorcycle. The gas poured out, the heat of the engine ignited it, and I got burned over 65 percent of my body." A quick-witted fellow in a nearby car lot doused Mitchell with a fire extinguisher and saved his life.

But his face had been burned off, his fingers were black, charred and twisted, his legs were nothing but raw, red flesh. It was common for first-time visitors to look at him and faint. He was unconscious for two weeks. Then he awoke.

"My recollection was that I was fairly positive. I remember asking somebody to bring in my flying books so that I could start studying my flying again."

Over four months, he had 13 transfusions, 16 skin-graft operations and other surgeries. "He had a spirit like I'd never seen before or since," says Dr. Mark Gorney, Mitchell's plastic surgeon and former chief of plastic surgery at San Francisco's Saint Francis Memorial Hospital.

Mitchell says his secret was twofold. The first was the love and encouragement of friends and family, and the second was a personal philosophy he had gleaned from various sources. He realized he did not have to buy society's notion that one must be handsome and healthy to be happy. "I am in charge of my own spaceship," he says. "It is my up, my down. I could choose to see this situation as a setback or a starting point."

Once out of the hospital, he says, he *continued*

a romantic figure as he piloted the city's famous trolleys. For a born showman, it was a fun life.

On June 19, 1971, he was on top of the world. The day before, he had bought a beautiful new motorcycle. That morning, he soloed in an airplane for the first time. He was 28, healthy and popular.

"That afternoon, I got on that motorcycle to ride to work," he recalls, "and at the intersection of 26th and South Van

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BY BRAD LEMLEY

WON'T BE DEFEATED/continued

spent "a lot of time trying to figure out how to do stuff." Even a stiff breeze brought agony. "I could not pick up a fork, take my pants off, go to the bathroom without help, dial a phone.

But he doggedly set to work learning to do all those things. Six months after the accident, he was flying again.

With about \$500,000 from a lawsuit against the motorcycle manufacturer and the owners of the laundry truck, he moved to the picturesque ski town of Crested Butte, Colo., 230 miles southwest of Denver. He bought a lovely Victorian house, an airplane, some real estate and a bar. Though he was a pretty unusual looking character, he did not lack for female companionship. His sense of humor put people at ease, and after a few minutes many forgot that he looked different at all.

Early in 1975, Mitchell teamed with two friends, invested \$25,000 and co-founded Vermont Castings Inc. As chairman of the board, he helped maneuver the tiny wood-stove company toward a position as Vermont's second-largest private employer. Eventually, his net worth climbed to nearly \$3 million.

Then, on the morning of Nov. 11, 1975, he and four passengers took off in his turbocharged Cessna. "I violated the cardinal rule of flying," Mitchell admits. "You never take off with ice on the wings. About 75 feet up, I realized the plane was flying oddly. It was rough, buffeting." He reduced power, and the plane "dropped just like a rock back onto the runway."

Excruciating pain shot up from his lower back. "I told the others to get out," he says, "but I couldn't. I could not move my legs." Mitchell's 12 thoracic vertebra was crushed, his spinal cord bruised beyond repair. He was a paraplegic.

Even the relentlessly optimistic Mitchell began to have dark moments. "I wondered what the hell was happening to me. What did I do to deserve this?"

But he still had his friends and that profound sense that he could create his own reality by focusing on the "can" rather than the "can't." He decided to follow the advice of the German philosopher Goethe: "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

Mitchell recalls another patient, a man about 19, whom he had met in the hospital's gymnasium: "This guy also had been paralyzed. He had been a mountain climber, a skier, an active outdoors person, and he was convinced his life was over. Finally, I went over to this guy and said, 'You know something? Before all of this happened to me, there were 10,000 things I could do. Now there are 9000. I could spend the rest of my life dwelling on the 1000 that I lost, but I choose to focus on the 9000 that are left.'"

Articulating his philosophy put his own values in sharp focus. Though financially successful, Mitchell admits his lifestyle was still rather self-centered.

He began to think back to Thoreau's moving essays on the glories of the wilderness, which his friends had read to him when he was a burn patient, and to think about the Rocky Mountains he had come to love.

In particular, he thought about Mount Emmons, called the Red Lady because of the rouge tint it takes at sunrise. It forms the backdrop of Crested Butte, and Mitchell regards it as "unspeakably beautiful."

One of the world's largest mining companies was staking claims on the mountain to extract molybdenum, a metal that strengthens steel. Many residents regarded the mine—and the more than 1500 workers who would descend on their quiet town—as inevitable, but not Mitchell. He ran for mayor, won and, as he puts it, "hit the ground

rolling."

From 1977 to 1981, he spent an estimated \$120,000 of his own money in a pitched battle to preserve the mountain and the town. He buttonholed politicians, captured media attention and prodded lawyers. In August 1981, the mining company withdrew.

In early February 1984, Mitchell decided to run for Congress. He turned his odd appearance into an asset, with slogans such as "I'm not just another pretty face."

Mitchell won the primary, but the Reagan coattail effect made 1984 a bad year for Democrats in Colorado, and he lost the election. He has no regrets and says, "I would not trade that experience for anything in the world."

Since 1986, Mitchell has busied himself with investments, environmental activism—he is on the board of

directors of the National Parks and Conservation Association and American Wildlands—and, increasingly, public speaking. He speaks to executives at conventions, but he also gives free talks to junior high students and others who can't swing his fee but could benefit from his message. He also has earned a master's degree in public administration.

"I tell people that I have had two big bumps in my life," he says. "If I have chosen not to use them as an excuse to quit, maybe some of the experiences that you are having which are pulling you back can be put into a new perspective. You can step back, take a wider view and have a chance to say, 'Maybe that isn't such a big thing after all.'"

W Mitchell

An author, entrepreneur, television host and internationally sought after speaker who keynotes, opens and closes meetings around the world, Mitchell delivers his message about Taking Responsibility For Change; how people can deal with setbacks and put themselves back in charge. He talks to groups about the possibilities of the human mind and spirit. He shares his philosophy, which is also the title of his book, It's Not What Happens To You, It's What You Do About It.

It's not only a spellbinding but an enduring message that allows people to profit from the entire program at a meeting.

The hundreds of groups to which Mitchell has spoken include: AT&T, the Million Dollar Round Table, Kimberly Clark-Australia, the American Society of Association Executives, Euronet (Germany), Persetel (South Africa) and IBM. Audiences as large as that of the Today Show and as small as one, in the Oval Office, have been uplifted by his courage.

To invite Mitchell to inspire your audience...or for more information, including how to order video and audio tapes, please contact: