

Story by Patrick Finley

<P>

Arizona Daily Star

<P>

Tucson, Arizona | Published: 08.20.2006

<P>

The flip was routine. Drew Donnellan had done it hundreds of times, even working on a double. A few days earlier, he had tried a single, overrotated and landed on his face — his muscle memory overriding his mind. On May 12, about an hour into practice at Gymnastics World, his feet left the blue mat. He rotated once, but his body couldn't stop. He landed on his head with a dull, heavy thud.

<P>

"Andrew!" screamed his coach, Yoichi Tomita, who sprinted over from 20 feet away. Other gymnasts scattered quietly to opposite corners, like ants in a rainstorm.

<P>

Drew rolled onto his back. He felt the padding against his head, but the rest of his body felt like it was floating.

<P>

The 16-year-old stared up into the eyes of his coach of seven years.

<P>

"I can't breathe," he puffed. "I can't breathe. Help me. Help me."

<P>

Short breaths, Yoichi told him. Drew followed his coach's instructions, and soon he was able to breathe.

<P>

A doctor and a nurse — parents who had been watching their children practice from the stands — stabilized Drew's neck. Yoichi called Drew's mother, Fran. Drew is hurt, he told her. The ambulance is on the way. "You need to get here," he said.

<P>

Yoichi pinched Drew's left leg. Can you feel this, he asked?

<P>

Drew stared at him quizzically.

<P>

...

<P>

Fran first heard about the boy who would become her son over a round of Red Stripe beers in Jamaica.

<P>

By 1989, her marriage had ended and her career at a senior-citizen care facility in Tempe had soured. At 37, needing a change, she joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Jamaica.

<P>

A 6-month-old had been abandoned at a hospital in Kingston, a friend told her.

<P>

Fran had considered becoming a single parent, but hadn't reached a final decision. Still, when she heard about Drew, she wanted to see him.

<P>

She took the bus from her post in Manchioneal to Kingston, about 20 miles away. On the bumpy roads, the journey takes almost two hours.

<P>

Fran met a malnourished Jamaican boy with bright eyes that followed her around the room. His smile belied his impoverished past.

<P>

The Dixon, III., native gave herself one night to think it over.

<P>

The next day, she returned to the hospital with friend and fellow volunteer Jane Little. Again, Drew's eyes followed her.

<P>

"When I met Drew," she said, "I knew that was it."

<P>

She told the hospital she wanted to adopt in late November 1990. By New Year's Day, about two months after they met, he was living with her. Drew became Fran's reason for being.

<P>

Fran became a Mother Bear. In the malnourished baby's first few weeks home with her, he started taking medication for intestinal worms. One night, he began coughing; Fran ripped a 7-inch worm from his mouth and stayed up all night with him, willing the sun to rise so she could take him to a doctor.

<P>

When she needed to go to a standpipe on a hill to draw water for the day, she'd bring her baby along, putting him in a cardboard box so he wouldn't wander off. He'd sit and play and giggle, while she scrubbed clothes in the cold water.

<P>

Many Jamaicans knew Americans as the characters they saw on soap-opera reruns.

<P>

Fran was different.

<P>

The skinny woman with red hair and sparkling blue eyes wasn't what the locals were used to seeing. She was a vegetarian who dressed Bohemian, with long skirts and a woven turquoise-colored handbag filled to the brim with everything from gum to fresh fruit.

<P>

When they took the bus around town, locals would point to Drew and say, "That's the baby from the hospital."

<P>

Fran had to stand for hours at a time on the overflowing, muggy, smelly bus. Drew didn't suffer like his mother. The locals would hold him and the little boy would smile and laugh as the bus rumbled down the road, Tracy Chapman or Michael Bolton blaring from small boom boxes.

<P>

It took 18 months for the governments of Jamaica, the United States and Arizona to sign off on the adoption.

<P>

Fran was eager to get back to the United States. Her father, a first-generation American and an "Irish nut," was in the last year of his life.

<P>

The Jamaican judge finalizing the adoption picked a name for Drew, as was the custom. He named him O'Shane McDonald. Fran, who called the baby "Andrew," changed the name to Andrew O'Shane James Donnellan. James was her father's first name.

<P>

Because Drew had no birth certificate, the judge guessed his birthday.

<P>

He picked March 17 — St. Patrick's Day.

<P>

It has to be fate, Fran thought.

<P>

•••

<P>

At age 9, having spurned tennis and soccer, Drew tried gymnastics.

<P>

For a kid with a single mother who worked 60 hours a week, it was something to do after school. The sport had no offseason. With the exception of two weeks a year — one over Christmas, the other in the summer — Drew attended gymnastics five days a week, three hours a day.

<P>

He was good at the sport. Other kids looked up to him. He made friends.

<P>

"It helped him become part of a community," Fran said.

<P>

Gymnastics helped teach Drew about hard work, focus and discipline. It chiseled him into a 5-foot-6-inch, 167-pound specimen. Even the gymnasts called him a Greek god.

<P>

With the muscles and accomplishments came confidence.

<P>

He needed it when he enrolled at Salpointe Catholic High School. Drew knew only three or four fellow freshmen when he enrolled there two years ago. Like any freshman, he worried about fitting in.

<P>

The place was nice, but sometimes strange. Once, while studying the civil rights movement, Drew looked around and realized he was the only black student in class.

<P>

As a freshman, football players would nag Drew on his way into school every day. They saw his pro-wrestler shoulders and tree stump of a neck and begged him to play football.

<P>

Drew couldn't imagine himself trying to knock somebody's head off. Inside his jock body was a sympathetic soul.

<P>

Fran nurtured that by involving her son in social issues, teaching him about one group that places water tanks in areas frequented by border crossers.

<P>

They spent their summers with friends in Canada — among Jamaicans and Dutch and foreign exchange students.

<P>

Drew wrote a poem about love when he was 13. When his favorite character from the computer game "Brothers in Arms" died, he had a watery-eyed talk with his mother about war.

<P>

Gymnastics made Drew challenge himself, the only person he ever liked competing against.

<P>

And it made him more outgoing. He became the drummer in a band, The Lemons, formed with Salpointe friends. Even after getting his driver's license in March, he walked to and from school, stopping weekly at Los Betos for his favorite — a bean burrito, rice and a large horchata.

<P>

In his eighth year of gymnastics, Drew had made it to Level 10 — the top rank in the Junior Olympic level. He was named the Gymnastics World boys team's most valuable gymnast this year. His powerful frame made him a natural at the vault and rings. He had a set of parallel bars in his room at home; one day, he snapped both bars with his sheer force. Coach Tomita kept one of them and gave Drew the other.

<P>

Over the next two years, his coach believed Drew would become one of the elite Level 10 gymnasts in the country. Drew wasn't sure he would continue gymnastics after high school.

<P>

A week before his injury, Drew participated in the USA Gymnastics Men's Junior Olympic National Championships in Battle Creek, Mich. Twenty friends and family members — including Fran's four siblings — made a vacation out of it.

<P>

They talked to Drew about what he wanted to do with his life.

<P>

He thought he knew. For Christmas, Fran bought him a trip to a weeklong film camp at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif.

<P>

He should have been there this summer.

<P>

•••

<P>

The ambulance screamed into the University Medical Center parking lot at around 7 the night of May 12.

<P>

A nurse from the trauma team whisked Drew away. A chaplain grabbed Fran by the arm.

<P>

Fran, who had made it to the gym just in time to see her son rolled into the ambulance, rambled to the priest, overwhelmed and scared.

<P>

A doctor in the intensive-care unit told her Drew had a severe spinal-cord injury, and he would probably never walk again. She almost fainted, and had to be propped up by a friend to finish the

conversation.

<P>

"I called him 'Dr. Gloom,' " she said.

<P>

A surgeon tried to calm Fran down, telling her ICU doctors rarely see patients during recovery, so they're not in a position to judge the situation.

<P>

Drew never saw his mother cry that night. She left the room to bawl.

<P>

Doctors performed an MRI on Drew and told his mother no bone was floating near his spinal cord. That made surgery to stabilize him simpler.

<P>

Fran wanted to hold her boy. But when she touched him, Drew said, politely, "Please don't touch me."

<P>

His nerve endings were on fire.

<P>

Drew was put on steroids. The doctors gave him morphine to dull the pain. The drug made him sleepy, and with sleep came the recurring dream.

<P>

"I couldn't stop rolling and bouncing," he said, "like in the inflatable fun-house jumping castle thing. I couldn't stop.

<P>

"I could feel it in my whole body; it felt so real."

<P>

Then he would wake up and remember.

<P>

It took doctors five hours to insert screws and rods into his spinal column.

<P>

It stabilized Drew, at least physically. But life had changed forever.

<P>

Drew didn't really understand it at first. He and Fran talked late into the night, his mom trying to prepare both of them for challenges that could last the rest of Drew's life.

<P>

"This isn't going away," she said.

<P>