

ESCONDIDO: Still recovering from hatchet attack, Chris Anguiano learning to be independent

24 Hour Fitness donates equipment to facility for blind where victim is staying

By GARY WARTH - gwarth@nctimes.com North County Times - The Californian | Posted: Tuesday, January 11, 2011 8:41 pm



Steve Lothspeich, left, of 24 Hour Fitness in Escondido, helps his friend Chris Anguiano try out some exercise equipment the fitness company donated to Junior Blind of America in Los Angeles. Anguiano was seriously injured in a 2009 hatchet attack in his Escondido home and is learning independent living skills at the facility. (Photo courtesy Junior Blind)

Still struggling with the injuries left by a 2009 attack in his Escondido home, Chris Anguiano is walking again, learning Braille and other new skills, and working out with exercise equipment a friend helped bring to a Los Angeles facility where he is temporarily living.

“I didn’t want to give up,” Anguiano said Tuesday about his determination to regain his strength and live independently in the wake of a horrific hatchet attack that left him blind and scared. “I didn’t want to let people down.”

There are plenty of people pulling for Anguiano, including his friend Steve Lothspeich, a trainer at 24 Hour Fitness in Escondido. The two met while working together at a part-time job about 10 years ago and, Lothspeich said Tuesday, he often saw Anguiano at the gym.

Lothspeich said he wondered why he hadn’t seen Anguiano for a while, then learned the disturbing reason when he saw his friend rolled into the gym in a wheelchair in early 2010.

Anguiano was sleeping at home with his then-girlfriend July 9, 2009, when an assailant sneaked into his room and attacked the couple with a hatchet.

Police arrested Border Patrol agent Gamalier Reyes Rivera. Investigators said they believe he had meant to attack his estranged wife and her boyfriend, who were in the next room. His trial is scheduled to begin Jan. 24 in Vista.

Anguiano woke from a two-month coma blind, with brain damage and deep scars on his face, neck and body from being hacked 17 times.

As soon as his doctors gave him the OK, Anguiano was back in the gym.

“I really couldn’t walk by myself then,” he said. “I needed help. My legs were weak.”

Lothspeich said he was “blown away” by seeing his severely injured friend come to the gym every day to work out. He kept coming until November, when Anguiano checked into Junior Blind of America, a Los Angeles nonprofit that offers a variety of programs for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Shirley Manning, director of Junior Blind of America’s Davidson Program for Independence, said clients usually stay for about six months to learn skills such as cooking, cleaning, Braille and walking with a white cane.

“The white cane is what’s going to set me free,” said Anguiano, who is using it to get around the 8-acre Junior Blind America campus.

Anguiano lives on the campus in a home with four other people. He still has nerve damage to his hands, but said he is starting to feel warm water again. His vision is limited to only detecting light or darkness around him.

He has continued his workout routine on campus, but during a Thanksgiving-weekend visit home, he told Lothspeich that the equipment at Junior Blind of America’s gym seemed to be decades old.

Lothspeich wrote to 24 Hour Fitness CEO Carl Liebert asking if the company could help. He heard back within a week, and on Tuesday he and other members of the company were at Junior Blind of America to deliver 11 pieces of refurbished equipment, including weights and cardiovascular machines, valued at about \$30,000 when new.

Manning said the equipment will be used by about 40 adults and children each day in the 1,200-square-foot gym.

Anguiano said he plans to return to Escondido after he graduates from the program and hopes to get a guide dog and continue his studies to be a registered nurse. He is looking forward to one day living on his own.

“I’ve learned how to bake chocolate chip cookies,” he said with pride. “I know how to do my laundry, and I’m getting better at folding my clothes.”

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