

AWARD

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low them to use for the first few months after an injury.”

Before becoming an advocate for wheelchair users, Bello made a name for himself in the football-gripped town of Hilmar where he helped lead Hilmar High to a record-breaking 13-straight wins and a Sac-Joaquin Section Division IV Championship appearance during the 2013 season. The leader of a defensive juggernaut as the team's middle linebacker, Bello finished his senior season with 138 tackles and was named All-District Defensive Player of the Year in addition to being invited to play in both the Lions All-Star football game and the Rotary All-Star football game.

“He was that kid that everybody talks about, everybody wishes they had him on their team. The old saying, ‘Give me seven guys like him and we’ll conquer the world,’ he’s just that kid,” Hilmar High head coach Frank Marques said. “Every time I think about Joseph Bello the football player I always get a smile on my face.”

Brought up in Hilmar's football system since grade school, Bello was the prototypical Yellowjacket by the time he joined the varsity ranks. A two-way player, he utilized his speed, intelligence and strength — he still holds the Hilmar squat record of 585 pounds — to make him a focal point of a 2013 team stacked with talent. In addition to breaking the all-time wins record at Hilmar, the '13 team also boasted one of the school's all-time defenses with an average of 10.8 points allowed per game.

“We weren't the biggest team, we weren't the most athletic, but we played with each other since 7th grade on and we loved each other,” Bello said. “We fought for each other and we played like a team in a way I've never seen anywhere else.”

“I really believe in my 17 years of coaching that the '13 team was elite in the top-two teams, maybe three, that we've been able to coach,” Marques said.

Despite their on-field prowess, Bello and his teammates were unable to best Central Catholic High in that year's section title game, marking the end of a remarkable 13-1 season. It was a devastating blow for the town of Hilmar but it would pale in comparison to the tragic accident just two months away.

“I had smaller, younger kids behind me, so I was leading them and I was looking around, making sure there was no one around, and a hill snuck up on me,” Bello recalled. “I stopped at the last minute, a little too late, and I went over the front of my bike off the hill.”

After being thrown off the hill, Bello's ATV landed on his back and broke his C4, C5 and C6 vertebrae, leaving him with no sensation below his chest mere months after competing in the biggest game of his life.

“It's one of those events in your life that happens that you know exactly where you were at, what you were doing, when it happened,” Marques said. “Everybody was in shock. Here's a kid who just a few moments earlier really had the world at his feet and then now, the future's unknown. All the plans the Bello's had changed in a split second.”

Bello was immediately flown to Sierra Vista Regional Medical Center in San Luis Obispo where, just three days after the accident, he underwent surgery to fuse his fractured vertebrae. By the time he was released from the hospital to begin the rehabilitation just two months later, Bello was left in a state of uncertainty

“At that time, I was in a dark place to be honest. I



Photo contributed

Joseph Bello works on his upper body strength during a rehab session at SCI Fit.



FRANKIE TOVAR/The Journal

Joseph Bello pictured here in 2013, holds the Hilmar High School squat record of 585 pounds.

was pretty depressed,” Bello said. “I really didn't feel confident going from the star football player to a guy who could barely lift his arms up. I've dealt with a lot of the issues I had at the time and I've really come to terms with who I am as a person.”

The acceptance of his situation began as Bello's rehabilitation process at the SCI Fit facility in Pleasanton progressed. Undergoing an aggressive therapeutic regiment, the focus he once spent on football was now aimed at regaining as much movement as possible.

“They believe that if you send a signal down with your brain, and you at the same time have someone assist you in moving your limbs, they meet in the middle and it starts to regenerate the spinal cord,” Bello said.

Before long, Bello began to move and use his arms again. He can now stand almost independently when assisted out of his wheelchair.

“Nobody was going to work harder on the football field. He was never outworked. In the weight room or in practice, in games, Joseph was that kid that left it all on the field. And I watched him in this rehabilitation process — the same thing,” Marques said.

As he progressed physically with therapy five days a week, Bello began the transition to academics. Starting with online classes at Modesto Junior College, Bello went on to complete three years at Merced Junior College before graduating from Merced College and transferring to the University of California, Merced where he is currently studying mechanical engineering.

At the beginning of 2020, as he began to prepare for his senior year at UC Merced, Bello decided to use what he had learned over the past six years to help solve some of the problems he encountered shortly after his injury, prompting him to team up with the SCI Active Network and apply for a Donald A. Strauss Scholarship.

“Our mission is empowering an active lifestyle through mobility, independence and a higher quality of life,” SCI Active Network founder Troy Plunkett said. “Meeting Joseph, I realized he was determined and he was really impressive with his knowledge.”

Plunkett, who was also paralyzed at the age of 17 due to a motocross accident, met Bello in September of 2019 during a fundraising event at an Oakland A's game. By January the two were collaborating on a plan to expand the existing Share-A-Chair program that was designed the tackle the issue of ill-fitting wheelchairs.

“The project's incredibly important for the wheelchair community because a wheelchair is obviously

so beyond vital to our independence and our mobility,” Bello said. “If you gave a full-grown man the legs of a 10 year-old, that's essential what a poor fitting wheelchair would be. We need something custom fit that allows us to get around and to move.”

The Share-A-Chair program currently serves wheelchair users from San Jose to Sacramento and everywhere in between, but with the help of the recently awarded \$15,000 scholarship the goal is to expand the program throughout California and beyond. The funds will be used to educate spinal cord injury victims and their family members on the mechanics, upkeep and terminology of wheelchairs as well as the complete refurbishment and distribution of chairs for those in need.

“If you don't have the exact fit you're kind of stuck, you're fitting in whatever you can,” Bello said. “They come out and they personally adjust it to fit you exactly. It gives you that mobility and independence, and it's a nice looking chair. Something you'll feel confident being in.”

The community service project will also have a heavy emphasis on educating businesses and organizations.

“Our goal would be to do some videos to share with other organizations nationwide to see if they would like to start their own Share-A-Chair program in their area. So, we're going to give them kind of a head start with how things work with our program,” Plunkett said.

On average a manual wheelchair costs \$6,000, making it difficult for many to test a variety of chairs in order to find a comfortable fit. Medicare guidelines also recommend getting a new wheelchair every seven years, further increasing costs. There is also an issue with wheelchair inventory as most existing wheelchair dealers offer a limited selection of models when it comes to loaner chairs.

“I got hurt in the middle of February and in June — June 6th or 7th when I graduated high school — I still didn't have my own chair. I was still in a loaner at the time; it didn't really fit that great,” Bello said. “I didn't know what I needed at the time, which is another function of this program. It allows you to try different chairs and to try different settings and to get together with somebody who's actually lived in a wheelchair for years and knows what they're talking about.”

To donate to the Share-A-Chair program contact the SCI Active Network at www.sciactivenetwork.org/donate

The Turlock Journal will release a mini-doc about Joseph Bello on July 17, 2020 online at TurlockJournal.com and all other social media platforms.

COVID

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to you today [Wednesday] we have 118 individuals in local hospitals who are COVID positive patients. In addition we have 52 suspected COVID positive patients, which is a significant number as well.”

Sixty-one percent of the hospital beds in Stanislaus County are in use and 68 percent of the ICU beds are occupied, according to the SCHSA. The ventilator supply is at 76 percent available.

Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors Chair Kristin Olsen initially questioned the move to close businesses again because the area's hospitals appeared to be capable of handling the rise in cases, but new information about staffing and isolation requirements means the bed availability is less.

“As it turns out, while the numbers reported to the State and County do accurately reflect the

number of licensed beds in our County, they do not reflect the number of available beds due to both staffing issues and patient isolation requirements,” Olsen wrote on Twitter. “In reality, our hospitals in Stanislaus County are very stretched at this time and are either at or near their max capacity in the ICUs.”

While COVID-19 is the most deadly for elderly individuals and those with underlying health conditions, the data locally is showing that younger age groups are seeing the most positive cases and hospitalizations.

Of the positive cases, 90 percent are in people 70 years and younger. The age group with the most positive cases are those between 21 to 30 years, which account for 20 percent of the total cases. That's followed by 31 to 40 year olds, which have 19 percent of the cases. Those 41 to 50 years account for 17 percent of the cases. Those 20 years and under and those between 51 to 60 years old, each

account for 14 percent of the cases. Those in the age groups of 71 to 80 years old and 81 to 90 years of each represent 4 percent of the cases. Those 91 years and older are at 2 percent of the cases.

Individuals 70 and younger are also having to be hospitalized, according to the SCHSA. The largest hospitalizations are among those 51 to 60 years and 61 to 70 years, which each represent 20 percent of the hospitalized cases. Those 71 to 80 years account for 15 percent of the hospitalizations, but are followed by 41 to 50 year olds, who account for 13 percent of the hospitalizations. The age group of 81 to 90 year olds are 12 percent of the hospitalizations and those 31 to 40 years old represent 11 percent of the hospitalized cases. Those 21 to 30 years old account for 5 percent of the cases, followed by those 91 years and older at 3 percent of the hospitalizations. Two percent of those hospitalized are 20 years or younger.

JESSICA

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\$150,000 to sponsor the kitchen in the new permanent home. A week later, the campaign received its largest community contribution toward the match from Select Harvest USA and generous grower associates who, together, committed \$300,000 to sponsor the circular talking room where children and families will gather to connect and support each other. The donation was in memory of

Nelson's son, Carter, who tragically lost his life last year in a car accident.

Those who would like to support the new Jessica's House facility can still do so. According to Nelson, it costs about \$1,500 to support one child at Jessica's House for a year. Community members can sponsor a building block for Jessica's House with gifts of \$250 or more and personalize it with the name of a lost loved one or message of support. Room sponsorships are also available, as well as recognition in The Heart Circle which

acknowledges pledges of \$5,000 or more over five years.

Daley, who served as Chair for the fundraising committee, expressed her gratitude to the community for their donations.

“To have met the \$3 million challenge is such a milestone for Jessica's House,” Daley said. “I have met with many of you in our community and it is because of you that we are here today. Thank you for opening your hearts and your homes to me these past two years.”

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