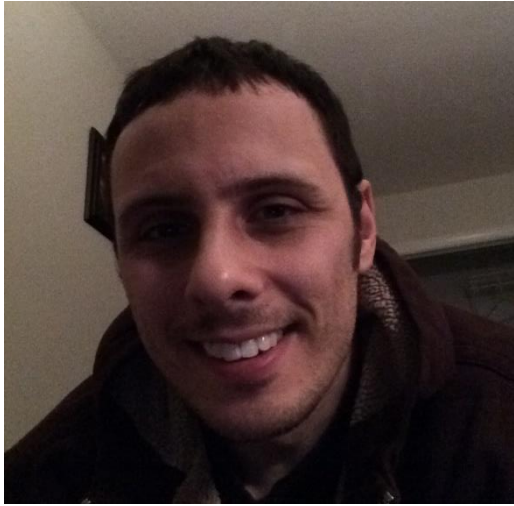


# MEET HAROLD



Greetings! My name is Harold Olcese, and I'm a resident of New Horizon's apartment complex in Middlebury, Connecticut. I was asked to share my story of how I came to be a resident of New Horizons and my personal story of where life has taken me since the day I became paralyzed.

It is a cautionary yet hopeful tale, one of personal triumph, and perseverance. Perhaps it will inspire you to become more independent!

In the summer of 2001, at just 20 years old, I made a decision that left me paralyzed and wheelchair bound for life: I dove head first into a shallow pool and broke my neck upon hitting the bottom. The circumstances of my injury included much youthful idiocy, alcohol, and a contempt for many things in life. All I can attest to is that youth is a tumultuous time for many—it most certainly was for me. Our limited years provide limited wisdom. Life, for all its beauty, is unfortunately very sparing in the amount of chances it gives us. I had several, though I squandered them. Fortunately, in time, things turned out well for me.

Becoming a quadriplegic was easy; living as one—even to this day—remains an immense challenge. Initially I underwent almost two years of physical therapy after a surgery to reconstruct my neck with titanium rods, wires, and a bone graft. I had to learn to dress and feed myself, and how to live as a quadriplegic in a very inaccessible world. Following that, I spent another two years just getting accustomed to going out into the world, interacting with people, and battling the anxiety and depression that manifested as a result of my paralysis—all while further coping with monstrous neuropathic pain. In 2006, or thereabouts, I enrolled in college. In 2008, I started driving again, getting a van with hand controls and a ramp. All hardships aside, I went on to earn a bachelor's degree in history in 2012.

When college ended I decided that I needed to enter the workforce again. Because of my extreme pain and the nature of quadriplegia (which differs for many) I could only work part-time. Luckily, I found something with the help of my family and have since been employed at a great software company in Connecticut for almost 7 years. Meanwhile, on the side, I paint landscapes and have a few other hobbies that have sustained me throughout the years.

By the time 2015 came around, I really wanted to try living on my own. Living with my parents was fine; the house is accessible and we all got along—even with our two very demanding cats. I could have remained there as long as I wanted, as their generosity is surpassed only by their love. And yet, despite that, as an adult I felt like I had to at least attempt living as one—on my own, master of my own domain, so to speak.

HAROLD

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I had no idea where to even begin looking for an apartment, let alone an accessible one. I felt like it was a hopeless endeavor—that I could never have my own place. So many factors had to be included. I needed a place with a shower I could wheel into; I needed a place that took care of snow removal, landscaping and all the attendant things to a regular home. I needed a place that was safe, local, and had adequate parking; also, I needed a place that was affordable.

Nevertheless, the dominant theme was wheelchair access. I've never been able to get into the houses of the people I've known throughout my sixteen years in a chair—unless they carried me in. Houses are just normally not designed with the disabled taken into consideration.

Whether it was fate, or an extraordinary stroke of luck, I cannot say; though I did indeed luck out finding New Horizons with help from my mother, who was a real estate agent at the time. I met a compassionate woman, named Carol, who helps run New Horizons and she aided me in my quest to become fully independent. Carol, along with an exceptionally nice maintenance man named Earl, showed me the apartment in Middlebury, and I immediately knew I wanted to live there.

It was perfect. Just three minutes away from my parent's house (also in Middlebury), fifteen minutes away from my job, and in such a lovely town, I truly felt like I was granted a personal blessing. The apartment is spacious enough for my wheelchair, with wide doorways and no complex handles and things which can be a nuisance. The shower is accessible, and there are ramps and sidewalks that lead right up to my outside doors. And there are absolutely no stairs! The mailboxes are accessible within the complex, and parking is just ten feet from my front door. As I said, it's perfect.

New Horizons put the capstone on my independence. I don't think of them as elusive or caustic landlords that one would just mail a rent check to. They provided something extraordinary for me and for the disabled/elderly community who cannot readily find accessible, affordable housing. I feel like they care—like they know we're not just a rent check every month. Moreover, I often wonder why there aren't more New Horizons housing complexes in Connecticut—for they are truly special places, more accessible than most of the residences in the State, and priced mercifully enough so that the disabled who cannot work full-time can afford to live on their own.

I have lived here in Middlebury at the New Horizons apartment since October 2015 and it has infused a unique happiness into my life knowing it's not hopeless to think that people in wheelchairs can live on their own.

Having that indescribable feeling of independence is priceless.

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