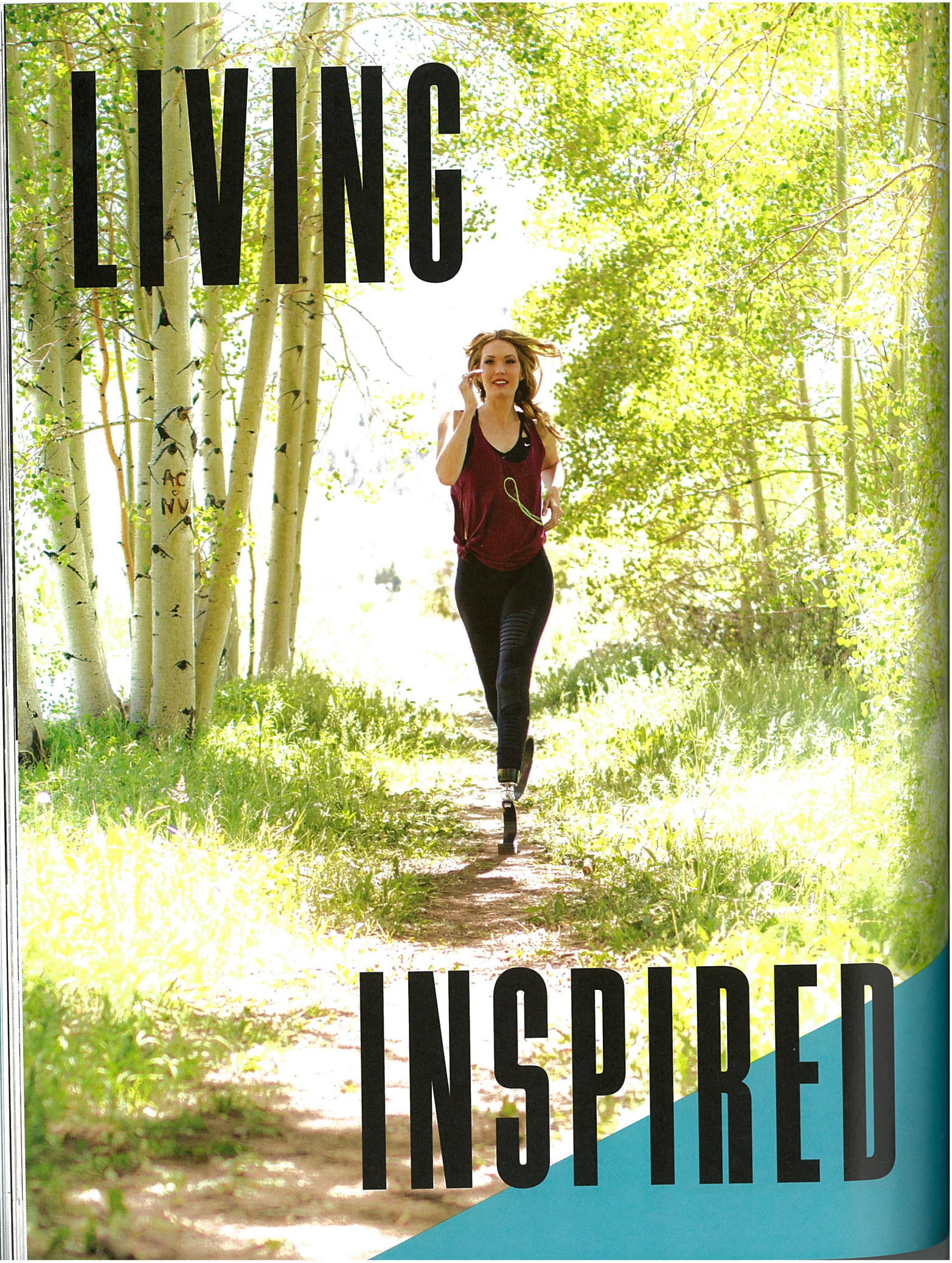

LIVING
INSPIRED

AMY PURDY NEVER QUITS, AND SHE INSPIRES OTHERS TO DO THE SAME

BY KIMBERLY NICOLETTI • PHOTOS BY JULIANNE O'NEILL & COURTESY OF AMY PURDY

Within 24 hours, Amy Purdy deteriorated from an active and passionate 19-year-old who loved everything — from snowboarding to playing piano — to a teen hospitalized in critical condition with a predicted two hours to live.

During this time, in August 1999, Amy's body flashed from flu-like symptoms to septic shock due to meningococcal meningitis. Her spleen burst. Doctors rushed her to surgery to remove the organ. At one point, she was so unstable, it took hospital staff 13 hours to move her incrementally from her hospital bed to the CAT scan room. Doctors said she had less than a two percent chance of surviving the meningitis. They placed her on life support, delivered multiple blood infusions and induced a coma.

Before this rare and serious infection threatened her life, Amy avidly divided her time between outdoor activities — snowboarding (her favorite), hiking, rock climbing, water skiing and more — and becoming a massage therapist in her hometown of Las Vegas. She dreamed of moving to Vail, where her aunt lived, to continue snowboarding.

During the first week of her coma, Amy had a near-death experience. She felt her heart "beating out" of her chest. She felt her last breath, her last heartbeat. A "calm, somewhat dark, empty space" pulled her in, she says.

"I was given a choice: to stay or go. I got so frustrated (and said), 'I'm not going anywhere. I haven't fallen in love. I haven't snowboarded enough.' Every amount of energy screamed in anger. I made a choice to be here," she says.

When she woke up from her coma, she thought: "No matter what happens, it's all going to make sense in the end."

She knew there would be highs, as well as lows. And, indeed, there were.

LOSS OF FOOTING

"I can't even describe the level of fear when they said, 'You either die or we amputate your legs.' There was no turning back," she explains. "I wanted to live, so I said, 'Let's do whatever we have to do for me to live my life.'"

Reality hit hard when she returned home three months later, confined not only in a wheelchair, but also needing kidney dialysis for about 18 months. A week before her 21st birthday, she received the gift of a kidney transplant from her father.

After losing both legs below her knees, she assumed her new legs would be "cool, bionic legs." But it wasn't so. The metal contraptions confined her, produced pain and were "ugly." After receiving her new legs, she crawled into bed and slept for 24 hours.

For the next few days, she just cried with her mom.

"I was totally depressed and so scared of my future," she says. "But then, honestly, I hit a point where I was so sick of myself, (I thought) 'I have got to move forward.'"

So, with a knot in her stomach for the next week she asked herself: "Now that this is reality, what does my life look like?"

Amy began to visualize herself walking gracefully, snowboarding again, and returning to her love of helping people — somehow.

"I could feel it so strongly," she says. "One way or another, I was going to do these things again."

Her goals and near-death experience decision pulled her out of depression.

"I knew I made a choice to be here, so I took responsibility. If I wanted the easy way, I could have taken the easy way out. That's why no victim mentality. (And) I had faith that everything will work out in the end," she says. "Not that I was always positive, but I was so grateful to be alive ... I only lost my legs, thank God. I was just so aware of how bad it could have been."

So, she began to prioritize what she needed to do each day.

MOVING ON

With her sister's wedding rapidly approaching, Amy had about a month to learn how to use her new legs if she wanted to walk down the aisle. So that became her first goal.

"Every part of that was baby steps — literally just trying to take one more step," she says.

Two weeks after receiving her prosthetics, she also got a new puppy — yet another reason to get out of bed.

She began to walk.

"It was step by step," she says. "A lot I'm not in control of, but a lot I am in control of and if I can put effort into that ..."

Amy walked the aisle at her sister's wedding and returned to snowboarding that year. When her legs hurt or challenges arose, she reminded herself of the bigger picture: "Somehow, it will all make sense."

Pieces started to fall into place when, in 2005, Amy joined other adaptive snowboarders in the cause to recognize Para Snowboarding at the Paralympics. That year, she also co-founded Adaptive Action Sports with her now-husband, Daniel Gale, a competitive snowboarder and avid skateboarder. The nonprofit introduces action sports, such as snowboarding and skateboarding, to people with physical disabilities and creates more opportunities for them to increase skills, and even compete.

In 2012, the International Paralympic Committee announced it would allow Para Snowboarding in Sochi's 2014 Games. Nearly 15 years after losing her legs, Amy seized her moment and earned bronze in snowboard-cross.

The Sochi Games overlapped with her participation on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars*, where she learned to dance everything from the salsa to tango with various prosthetics. She worked seven hours a day, seven days a week for three months straight to earn the runner-up spot on the show.

TRAGEDY THREATENS 2018

Before contracting meningitis, one of Amy's many goals involved traveling, but she never imagined it would be with Oprah Winfrey. She seemed to be living a dream life after Sochi's Paralympics — she danced in front of millions in gorgeous costumes, she published a book, she starred in a Super Bowl commercial. She even got married and bought a house. And then she accompanied Oprah on a speaking tour.

Then, one morning in June 2017, when Amy was at the Olympic Training Center preparing for the 2018 Paralympic Games, she couldn't feel her arms. She couldn't even move them. The condition arose as quickly as the meningitis had.

"My arms were on fire," she says. "They were numb, yet in pain."

For years, she had learned to rely on her arms, but now because of a condition diagnosed as idiopathic brachial neuritis, she couldn't wash her own hair. She couldn't even put her legs on.

"I cried every morning and every night," she says. "It was more traumatic than losing my legs. That was cut and dried. This wore me down emotionally because of the fear of: What is this and will I have this the rest of my life?"

By early fall, she had regained some arm function, but it wasn't nearly enough to continue her plan to compete in 2018 at the PyeongChang Winter Games, so she turned to Howard Head Performance Powered by EXOS. The coaches and physical therapists usher athletes, as well as the general population, to the next level of personal fitness and overall wellness.

Chris Knerl, Amy's coach at Howard Head Performance, takes a special interest in helping people realize their personal goals, and despite the condition of Amy's arms, he was confident he could help her. He used EXOS' four pillars — mindset, nutrition, movement and recovery — to prepare Amy for the Winter Games.

Amy needed her arms for a strong pull out of the gate, as well as balance on the course. Yet, the neuritis prevented her from strengthening her arms; they needed rest to recover. So Chris focused on core and lower body strengthening.

Still, by November, Amy says she felt "nowhere near prepared for the Paralympics." She battled with the decision of whether or not to compete in PyeongChang. At 38, she was twice as old as many of the competitors.

With Chris' help, she focused on her strengths. She possessed a solid strategy and more experience in competition, so she directed her energy there.

"Instead of what I lost, I was focusing on what I was going to do with what I had," Amy says.

Week by week, her arm muscles, previously flaccid and drooping from the nerve injury, strengthened. Still, she worried. She wasn't ready for world-class competition.

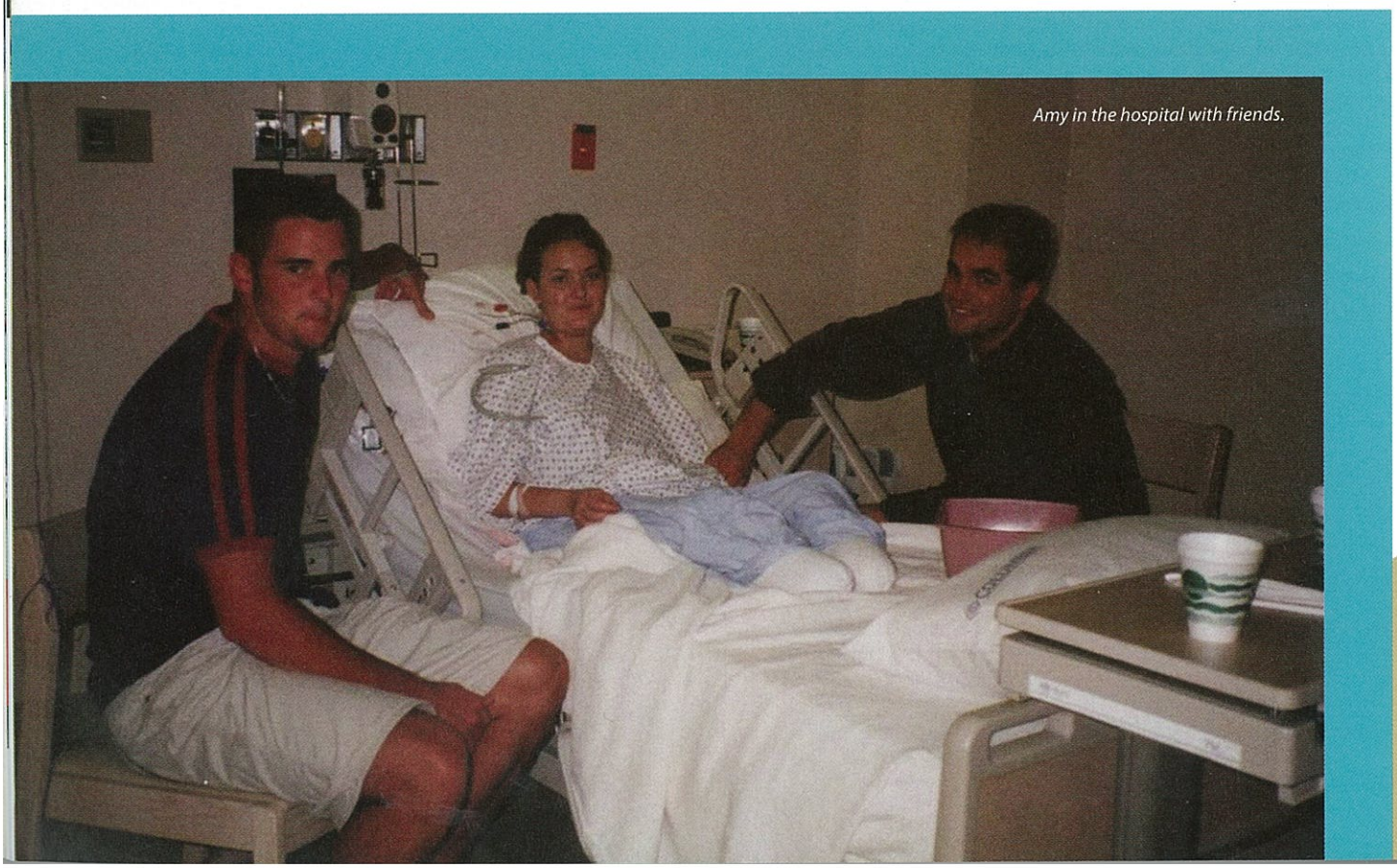
"When it came to her legs, she had no fear. She would try anything," Chris says. "But when it came to her arms, you could tell she was tentative."

Just like any client Chris works with — be it a 94-year-old he coaches or a weekend warrior — he didn't ignore Amy's fear.

"Taking people to the desired level of fitness begins with making them feel comfortable," he says of his clients. "Some days you back off and have a little fun and other days you work at strength. You build confidence through something they're good at and take baby steps."

Education plays a big role with everyone he works with, including Amy. One key to her healing included a high-protein diet.

"I didn't trust my own knowledge of how to do physical therapy and weights safely," Amy says. She pursued Howard Head Performance because "It was the right place to go to safely work out again. I certainly wouldn't have gotten



Amy in the hospital with friends.

Amy takes the final jump in the snowboard-cross at the Paralympics in PyeongChang.

Amy took bronze in the snowboard-cross during the 2014 Sochi Paralympics; in 2018 she won silver in snowboard-cross and bronze in banked slalom at the PyeongChang Paralympics.

where I'm at if it weren't for them. It's not just a Band-Aid. It's proper healing. It gave me a lot of confidence, and confidence builds on confidence."

By the end of November, Amy committed to competing at the Winter Games. By January 2018, she had regained about 60 percent strength in her arms; she didn't experience pain, just atrophied muscle due to the nerve injury.

She arrived in PyeongChang with 75 to 80 percent strength in her arms. She couldn't pull out of the gates with 100 percent force, so she focused on strategy, a positive mental state, remaining calm under pressure and truly enjoying herself.

"I kept a very soft heart all day, and ultimately I won one of the trial races and advanced all day into the finals due to that strategy," she says. "(Winning trials) made me realize my strategy of being light-hearted and taking the pressure off of myself was working. It showed me that I didn't need full strength physically to get ahead. I could do it mentally and with how I approached the day."

Her tactic earned her silver in snowboard-cross and bronze in banked slalom in PyeongChang, proving, once again, that when Amy sets her mind to something, she accomplishes it.

"So much comes down to choice and the decisions we make," she says. "You can decide to do nothing and be a victim and lay in bed, or you can give yourself little steps that can pull you through."

For Amy, it comes down to focusing her attention on what is possible and never giving up.

"Amy's serious drive is evident in everything she does," Chris says.

Amy's optimism, love for outdoor adventure and desire to help others has continually fueled her. Her motto is "live inspired," and not only does she embody it, she inspires others to do the same.

These days, she's entering yet another transition: Post-Paralympic life. Her main goal involves taking care of herself, not in a selfish way, but in a manner that will allow her to grow older and remain physically and mentally strong. The last five years — and, one could argue, her whole life — have been "Go, go, go," she says.

"I want to take the pressure to achieve off. I plan to snowboard more for my soul than for medals."

Amy's life journey has taken many turns, but she consistently finds ways to not just walk but blaze through every obstacle and come out stronger on the other side.

"Exercise has been a constant healer in my life," Amy says. "It's how I take care of myself."

> EXERCISE HAS BEEN A CONSTANT HEALER IN MY LIFE. IT'S HOW I TAKE CARE OF MYSELF.