

Heartland Center to close after 38 years

## Coming full circle

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Alyson Roth's journey after a tragic car accident

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For Alyson Roth, moving to Oakhurst means coming full circle from the person she was 13 years ago to the person she is today. Roth wanted to be near the one place that will always hold a special place in her heart and feels like home -- Yosemite National Park -- the last place she remembers walking.

Roth was a 20-year-old college student majoring in music the first time she came to Yosemite in 1999. While attending Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., Roth heard about a ministry in Yosemite. She had always wanted to visit California so applied for the position and was accepted. She moved out to Yosemite for the summer and worked with Yosemite Christian Ministries while working a full time job as a cashier in the Curry Village Cafeteria.

Roth loved Yosemite so much that she returned to the park the following year and worked as a desk clerk at Curry Village. She was 21 years old and it was the summer before her senior year in college. In July, her best friend, Jennifer Stapleton, decided to fly out to California to visit Roth for the long weekend. Roth drove up to San Francisco to pick her up at the airport and the two spent the day being tourists in the city. That night, Stapleton proposed the two of them roadtrip back to Georgia together. It was a Thursday night, though, and they would need to make it to Georgia by Monday. Roth was unsure of them making it all the way across country in just two days and didn't even know if her 1987 BMW could make the journey.

"I wasn't an impulsive person at the time, so I thought and prayed about it overnight," Roth said.

The next morning, Roth told Stapleton they'd go for it. They drove to Yosemite, Roth showed Stapleton around the park a little, Roth gathered her things, said her good-byes.

Roth's boss, Lance Wellwood, who is now the director of hotels at Delaware North Companies, warned her that the idea was a bad one. However Roth and Stapleton began their roadtrip that night around 11:30 p.m. Roth drove the first leg while Stapleton slept.

Around 5:30 a.m. the next morning, Stapleton was wide awake so the two switched places in Barstow after getting gas and checking in with their parents. They put on their seatbelts, Roth told Stapleton the route they needed to take, and then Roth fell asleep. Two hours later, Stapleton woke Roth up when she realized she had driven the wrong way and ended up in Nevada. They didn't want to completely retrace their steps so decided to take State Route 164. There was no one on the road and nothing around but tumble weeds, so Roth once again fell asleep. Not long later, Roth was awakened around 7:30 a.m., Saturday, July 29, with Stapleton screaming, "Alyson, we're swerving!"

Roth says she doesn't remember much after that point -- she just knew there was nothing she could do. Later they learned that the BMW had caught the edge of the road and Stapleton over-corrected, which caused her to lose control of the car. The car flipped two and-a-half times, each time hitting the passenger side of the car where Roth sat. The impact was so strong that Roth was ejected from the car, even though she had been wearing her seatbelt, and was thrown between 20 and 30 feet.

The car finally stopped on its roof with Stapleton dangling from her seatbelt. She unbuckled it, landed on the roof, and went searching for Roth. When she found Roth, she was covered in blood and there was no

movement.

Stapleton ran back to the car and grabbed her cell phone, but there was no reception. She couldn't even dial 911. Roth said Stapleton grabbed her Bible, ran back to Roth's side and began praying over her body. Finally Roth started moaning and saying she couldn't move her legs.

Just a few minutes later, an 18-wheeler approached. The driver saw the accident and stopped. The driver was able to call for help with his truck radio and soon Flight for Life was on its way. Roth was placed on a backboard and transported to a trauma center in Las Vegas.

However, something mysterious happened that makes Roth think God was by her side the whole time.

"There was no record of the trucker ever being there," Roth said. "No one but Jennifer and I know about it. Both of us believe it was an angel and that there's a reason I'm still here, because I should have died in that car accident."

On that Saturday, Roth's mother, Jane, had gone to practice the organ at the church. Around 10:30 a.m. Eastern time, the same time as the accident, there was a crashing sound in the church's fellowship hall. Jane was so scared she jumped right off the organ bench, but soon found out there was no apparent reason for the crashing sound. Everything was still in its place -- a coincidence that still baffles Roth and her family.

When Roth arrived at the trauma center, she was immediately prepped for surgery. Because she was not fully conscious, the hospital needed permission from a parent/guardian to do the surgery. The hospital finally reached Roth's brother, Michael, who then got in touch with Roth's father, Kevin. Kevin asked doctors if he could get a second opinion and the doctor told him there was no time for that or Roth would die because she was bleeding internally and spinal fluid was leaking into her body and poisoning her.

Her parents caught the first flight out to Las Vegas, not knowing if their daughter would be alive or not when they arrived. The doctor had given them three options -- either Roth would be a paraplegic, quadriplegic, or she wouldn't make it.

Roth made it through surgery and was in critical care for five days. She was then flown to Shepherd Center, a spinal cord injury rehabilitation center, in Atlanta, Ga. The rehabilitation center was only about 40 minutes from her home. It was there that Roth began to learn how to live again.

"They really taught me everything I know," Roth said. "I give them a lot of credit for bringing me back to life and independence and teaching me how to drive, how to dress, and how to be comfortable in my new body."

However it wasn't always an easy road. Roth remembers the first outing she took to the theater with other people from the rehab center.

"I remember wanting to cry and hide because I felt like everyone was staring at me," Roth said. "I wanted to say to everyone, 'It's not my fault.' That was the first harsh reality of reality, but I didn't want it to stop me."

For the next few years, Roth said she went through stages of anger, denial, and bargaining before realizing she had two choices -- sit around and be angry, frustrated, and blaming others, or make the best out of her situation and help others.

Six months after the accident, January 2001, she went back to college and graduated in 2002 with a bachelor of science in music education. She taught music to inner city students in Atlanta for three years, but then decided she needed to check something off her bucket list -- living in California for at least a year. So, in 2005, she made her dream come true and moved to Orange County. She taught music in the private sector for a while before deciding that it was time to give back. To do so, she was working for Free Wheelchair Mission -- an organization that provides wheelchairs for those living in underprivileged countries.

During that time, Roth checked quite a few other things off her bucket list including being the first woman with a disability to surf in the U.S. Open of Surfing in 2009, being crowned "Ms. Wheelchair California" in 2009, and placing second Runner Up at the "Ms. Wheelchair America" pageant in Rapid City, SD in 2010. She was also included in the documentary, "Defining Beauty: Ms. Wheelchair America." The film went on to receive "Best

Documentary" at the Staten Island Film Festival in June 2011.

Roth also sat on Yosemite's board of directors and offered input on how to make the park more wheelchair friendly.

"Alyson has been able to show us that, even though certain items may be considered accessible under the Americans with disabilities act, they may still not be the most comfortable or best option for a person using a wheelchair."

Wellwood said he was in shock when he first learned of Roth's accident almost 13 years ago, but her faith and relationship with God through it all have been an inspiration to him.

"Alyson's story is one of courage and accomplishment," Wellwood said. "She is an example to all on how to overcome adversity and prosper. She has not let her disability slow her down, and instead has used it to garner strength to accomplish things that even those who can walk, have not."

After working at Free Wheelchair Mission for a few years, Roth said she began to feel that a change was coming soon. After a rough 2012, which included a broken femur and another surgery, circumstances lead Roth back to Yosemite and she realized she never wanted to leave.

"Yosemite is home," Roth said. "It's the last place I remember walking and that's the Alyson that I remember."

Roth is now substitute teaching, giving private piano and violin lessons, and focusing on writing a book -- something she felt called to do by God while still in the critical care unit. She has also joined the Mariposa Symphony Orchestra and will play in the orchestra's concert at 2 p.m., Sunday, April 28 at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite. For Roth, who had to re-learn how to play the violin after the accident, this is a huge accomplishment.

"I now get to fulfill this dream and I'm ecstatic," Roth said. "It's going to be a great concert and I'm really excited about it."

Mariposa Symphony Orchestra conductor Les Marsden said re-learning to play an instrument, as Roth did, is not easy but her hard work has more than paid off.

"That's no easy task," Marsden said. "But what has emerged is a wonderfully adept, wonderfully technically-assured violinist with a huge amount of passion in her playing, which makes her a huge asset to this orchestra. I'm sure most people might not possess the courage Alyson found within herself to fight back rather than to wallow and give in."

On top of writing, teaching, and music practice, Roth is also continuing her advocacy platform of "Connective Healing." It brings together life coaching and adaptive sports to those with disabilities and teaches them to push onward in life in a positive way. She also wants to educate the public that despite disabilities, people are still capable of much more than they may think.

"I will be celebrating my 13th anniversary (of the accident) in Yosemite National Park on July 29 this year, and I feel that I have now come full circle with where I was then and where I am now physically, emotionally, and spiritually," Roth said. "I am such a better person now because of this paralysis and the life lessons it has taught me. I'd be a completely different person had this not happened to me. I'm all about making my dreams come true rather than waiting for them to happen."

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