

# FINDING HIS ZEN

A local yoga instructor discovers the healing power of yoga firsthand

By Shelly Atkinson

It was Friday night, and Michael Cremone was running late. He kept one hand on his SUV's steering wheel and used the other to loosen his tie — all the while focused on being on time to meet his friends for cocktails. When the light in front of his vehicle turned



red, he made the split-second decision to race through it. It was the last time he would be in control of anything for quite some time.

As his SUV collided with a tractor-trailer, Cremone and his vehicle sailed 75 feet through the air. He spent the next three days in a coma. Family members wept at his bedside, praying that he would survive.

When he finally awoke, Cremone instinctively tried to get out of bed. But he couldn't move.

"I thought, 'My life is over,'" Cremone says of his traumatic 2004 accident.

"I was out of my mind on pain meds, my leg had a hole in it, my arm was stapled shut and my face was in pieces. The doctors told me I would never walk again."

The months following the accident are still a blur to Cremone. Trapped in a wheelchair with his jaw wired shut, he was too absorbed in his pain to think about anything else. Commuting between grueling rehab appointments in order to learn to walk again and plastic surgery appointments to rebuild his mashed ears, he had hit bottom.

"I felt abandoned," he recalls.

Weeks passed before he could even consider moving a leg, and his mind was faring no better than his body. Constantly questioning his own lack of judgment, he thought about how much worse things could have been.

"Then, one day," says Cremone, "my sister asked me what I would like to do if I weren't just lying in bed." His answer surprised even himself: practicing yoga. The fitness buff had pursued yoga in the past and saw an opportunity to change his life for the better. He began by reading yoga books that his sister brought to him.

"Before the accident, my yoga was purely physical," he says. "In every class, I wanted to be the star, but I wasn't really doing yoga."

After the accident, Cremone realized there was much more to a yoga discipline. "I finally understood that, whether I walked or not, I was happy to be alive. I learned to accept where I was."

The more he thought about yoga, the more his health improved. "Once I eliminated the bad thoughts and started focusing on the meaning of yoga, things started to change," Cremone says. "I did my greatest yoga practice when I couldn't even move a muscle in my body."

After months of rehab, he sought the training of a former yoga teacher. The guru's advice: If you don't use it or move it, you will lose it. And that tough-love approach continues to inspire Cremone's present brand of yoga therapy.

His big break came when he started subbing as a yoga instructor at a local gym. He got a call at 5pm on a Wednesday night to teach that evening's mat-to-mat 6pm special, and he hasn't looked back since.

Today, he works in the Princeton area with nearly 500 students each week, helping them bring a reality-focused, spiritually-inspired

yoga practice into their daily lives. Cremone's Ashtanga-based classes offer a refreshing presentation. He pushes his students beyond their expected limits and refines but never over-corrects.

Don't complain about a pose in Cremone's class. He might just tell you that you should feel lucky to be trying to twist your legs into that position — after all, you still have legs.

Though yoga has given him a second chance at a better life, Cremone hasn't changed his name, given up beef or declared breathing to be a

sacred act. The gift he gives himself and his students is simple: proceed with meaning, control deadlines instead of letting them control you and don't cheat red lights. •

