

Graduate outfitted with a different set of wings

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Breaking her back in a paragliding accident four years ago changed Erin Fowler's life in ways she never could have imagined. She's actually happier than before she became wheelchair-bound.

And life up to that point was always pretty good for the 24-year-old high school valedictorian from Maui.

"I've been granted wisdom that is generally reserved for older people,"

she said. "I've learned to appreciate the fragility of life."

She also has learned to continue pursuing athletic activities she always loved: visiting the beach, taking a "walk" every day in her wheelchair,

and even swimming and skiing. This spring she took sailing lessons.

That accident during spring break in Maui eventually led Ms. Fowler to UCSB because the sidewalks at the University of Utah, where she started college, were too slippery for a wheelchair.

On Saturday morning at the UCSB campus, she picked up her bachelor's degree in psychology with two medals around her neck — one for the Psi Chi National Honor Society and the second for winning the Thomas More Storke Award, the highest honor for a student at the school.

She became one of 4,250 UCSB students to receive degrees in ceremonies that started last weekend and ended today.

Learning to live with the paralysis in her legs was a long road of denial, anger



Erin Fowler wears two medals Saturday — one for the Psi Chi National Honor Society and one for the Thomas More Storke Award.

and four colleges before Ms. Fowler found a school where she felt the people were friendly enough.

After her accident she became interested in helping troubled youth. She has volunteered as a crisis counselor for the Santa Barbara family service agency Helpline, and also works with physically and developmentally disabled children.

"It feels so wonderful to know that I've overcome all these obstacles, and this award, it's kind of symbolic," she said a few days before the ceremony. "I hope I don't start crying."

The Storke Award is named for the former editor and publisher of the News-Press, who established the honor in 1968 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the University of California.

The award recognizes her academic achievement, a 3.84 grade-point average and undergraduate work in a research project called "The Predictors of Academic Success and Social Adjustment among College Freshmen and Sophomores with Disabilities and Medical Challenges."

The project results haven't been published yet, but Ms. Fowler says she's finding that disabled children are more likely to be abused or neglected by their parents, and those who are tend to be less likely to do well in school.

The award also honors her service to the community, "courage" and "persistence," according to the award criteria.

Professor Daphne Bugental, who nominated Ms. Fowler for the award, said she has "exceptional ability" and that her research is "extremely ambitious and likely to yield some very important findings."

Throughout her life, Ms. Fowler has excelled in school by studying up to 10 hours a day. At first she wanted to become a doctor, but after the accident and two months in a hospital bed, she decided she never wanted to be in a hospital again.

A therapist helped her through a difficult time following her accident and made her realize how beneficial a good mental health professional could be.

"I was feeling guilty about the

decision I made. I didn't realize paragliding was so dangerous," she said. "She kind of helped me to see that although I did take that risk, I shouldn't feel that way."

With graduation behind her now, Ms. Fowler will attend the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego to become a clinical psychologist with a family-child emphasis.

The paragliding accident has given her some new skills that will help her be a better psychologist. It was during a supervised flight that she crashed into the side of a ravine and fell about two stories. She was conscious during the entire ordeal.

"I have a much better understanding of human suffering," she said.

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