

Victor skied in the Giant Slalom race in High One, Korea at the 2009 World Championships, where she won the Giant Slalom, Slalom and Super Combined.

Photo by Isao Horikiri



TURNING TRAGEDY INTO TRIUMPH

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

On December 19, 1995, Stephani Victor's life changed forever. Victor had been standing on a sidewalk in Hermosa Beach, California, when an out-of-control car jumped the curb and barreled toward her. The car pinned her against another car, dragging her about 15 feet and crushing her legs.

To save her life, doctors had to amputate both of her legs above the knee. She was only 26 years old.

While in the intensive care unit, Victor, a USC film studies graduate, had a vision that she needed to make a documentary about her recovery. She began filming just five days after the accident, and the camera would keep rolling for the next several years while she endured 14 reconstructive surgeries and regained her independence.

"There is inordinate difficulty in overcoming a tragic accident while living your day-to-day life," says Victor, a 1987 graduate of Quaker Valley High School. "The documentary film is a labor of love, and

**QUAKER VALLEY GRAD
STEPHANI VICTOR
BECOMES PARALYMPIC
ATHLETE.**

became much more expansive than I could have imagined."

Three years after her accident, Victor, an actress, found herself at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, promoting a role in a movie. While there, she took her first adaptive ski lesson. After a few lessons, she was approached about training for the Olympics. As both a filmmaker and

a lifelong athlete who had enjoyed skiing with her family, she told herself that winning a medal at the Olympic Games would make a great finale for her film.

"I asked myself, 'What have I got to lose?' After all, what greater triumphant ending could I create for my film than winning a gold medal at the Olympics?" she recalls.

She began intensive training, working with Marcel Kuonen, a former Swiss Ski Team racer who would later become her husband. Seven years after her accident, at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Victor won a bronze medal in downhill skiing.



Victor was the first athlete to win the Super Combined Gold Medal and two Silver Medals in Giant Slalom and Slalom during the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada.

Photo by Marcel Kuonen

Not satisfied with bronze, Victor vowed to continue training. Four years later, she would win a gold medal in slalom at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy. Then, in 2010, at the Vancouver Olympics, she would medal in three events: silver in both the slalom and giant slalom, and another gold in the super combined.

"I'm incredibly grateful for my skiing career," says Victor. "If the accident was my first act, this has been my second act. It provides me with a backdrop to shake up people's perceptions about disability—and I get to work with a person I love in an extraordinary way."

Since the 2002 Olympics, Victor has amassed an impressive list of athletic achievements: she's a four-time World Champion, a five-time Overall World Cup champion, and has earned 24 World Cup victories. She is the 2003 European Cup Champion and is an 11-time U.S. National Champion. She's also collected an array of awards,

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which includes being a two-time ESPY Awards nominee and the 2009 USOC Paralympic Sportswoman of the Year, among many other honors. She's also a 2016 inductee to the Quaker Valley Hall of Fame.

"Skiing has been my exclusive focus for the past 18 years. Being a professional athlete is all-consuming, from what you eat, to the way you sleep, to the water you drink," she explains. "It's completely removed me from those stereotypes of what a person with a disability can do. Instead, I'm focused on giving my best athletic performance."

Today, Victor is still defying the odds. At 48, she is temporarily relocating to Switzerland to train for her fifth Paralympic Games, which will take place in Pyeongchang, South Korea, in 2018. Post-production of her documentary, titled "The Lengths I Will Go," is on hold while Victor trains.

"It's been 21 years since my accident, and I've shattered the negative stereotypes about being disabled and about age," she says. "I'm so grateful that I have the support systems in place to overcome these challenges and to keep me going."

She returns to Pittsburgh regularly, both to visit family and to speak at local schools. She credits her Pittsburgh roots for helping her to overcome her obstacles.

"I can't say enough about the value of growing up in a small community," she notes. "You honestly create friendships that last a lifetime, no matter where you go in the world."

A motivational speaker, philanthropist and activist, Victor thrives on sharing her story with others. She works with numerous organizations, including the Chaffin Luhana Foundation, Classroom Champions and Shane's Inspiration, to deliver messages of hope and awareness.

"It's important for me to share my story. Adaptive skiing has been a critical part of my recovery and well-being. If one person could benefit from hearing my story—if that could be the very thing that opens the door to opportunity—then that is my mission," she says. "The message is bigger than myself. My story is less about what's happened to me, and more about what's possible for others." ■