

Life Is Beautiful – A Profile Of Ken Kunken '72

The January-February 2008 edition of the *Cornell Alumni Magazine* features the extraordinary life of Sigma Nu's Ken Kunken '72. He was paralyzed on the football field but has gone on to achieve more in his life professionally and personally than most individuals could ever dream.

The *Sigma News* caught up with Ken recently and he explained how the brothers of Sigma Nu have made an enormous difference in his life. He pledged Sigma Nu with good friends, including current Property Association President Dan Galusha '72. Ken was injured during his junior year and was forced to take a year off for rehabilitation before returning to school, living in special accommodations in Sage Hall.

"The brothers used to help me a lot," recalls Ken. "One brother a night came up to Sage Hall to spell my attendant. Everyone tried to make it as easy an adjustment as possible, and it was good to know I could count on the brothers."

While Ken lived in Sage Hall, he still spent time at the house for parties and other events. "You could easily get lost at Cornell without good close friendships," said Ken. "Sigma Nu was family away from home, a place where you could open up and share concerns with other brothers and get away from the challenges of school and enjoy time with good friends."

Ken's fondest memories of 230 Willard Way include something that might shock younger alumni and today's brothers. "I loved eating with the guys, dressed in the mandatory jacket and tie five nights a week," said Ken. "Maybe we were nuts, but it looked great and added a real decorum to the house and when you brought a date to dinner, they were truly impressed."

Today, Ken works as a trial lawyer and supervisor in the District Attorney's office on Long Island and is doing more and more work as a motivational speaker, speaking in front of athletic teams, doctors, business owners, judicial conferences, sales managers and account executives.

While Ken does not get to visit Cornell as often as he would like, he stays connected to the school and has enjoyed the recent run to the NCAA tournament by the basketball teams, and Sigma Nu is always in his thoughts.



All in the family: Kunken at home in Rockville Centre, Long Island, with his wife, Anna, and sons (from left) Jimmy, Timmy, and Joey. The Kunkens did extensive renovations to make the house accessible for his motorized wheelchair.

"Even when I am not in touch with the brothers, I think about them and our shared experiences all the time."

The *CAM* article about Ken is excerpted below and can be read, in its entirety, at www.cornellalumnimagazine.com.

Father Courage - By Beth Saulnier

As a Cornell junior, Ken Kunken '72 was paralyzed by a football injury and given little hope for a full life. Today, he's a Long Island D.A. with four academic degrees, a happy marriage—and three-year-old triplets.

The Kunken boys have turned their living room into a combination obstacle course and trampoline. Having taken the cushions off the sectional sofa to form a padded square, the tow-headed triplets are running and hopping and somersaulting in a manic loop. A few months shy of three years old, the brothers are a force of nature as they race around the room—falling, laughing, and picking themselves up again. Their father looks on, wearing a smile so wide it borders on the comical. Ken Kunken '72 is sitting in a motorized wheelchair, almost completely paralyzed from the neck down for the past thirty-seven years, and he is deliriously happy. "They're not putting on a show for you," he tells a visitor to the family's spacious ranch house in Rockville Centre, Long Island. "I swear, they're like this every single night."

Even in an age when fertility clinics are commonplace, the arrival of Joey, Jimmy, and Timmy in January 2005 was enough of a medical marvel that it attract-

ed a flurry of local news coverage; there's a framed *Newsday* cover story over the mantle in the Kunkens' den. "Paralyzed Man Fathers Three Sons," announced the local CBS affiliate, declaring that the triplets prove "that the impossible is achievable." Kunken was fifty-five when his Polish-born wife, Anna, gave birth by C-section. Although the boys spent several weeks in the neonatal ICU, they emerged with no lasting health problems. "When we were talking about getting married, Anna told me that she'd like to have my baby," Kunken says. "Not just a baby, but she wanted my baby. She wanted to see a little Kunken running around."

They went through three unsuccessful rounds of in vitro using electro-ejaculation before Kunken had surgery to retrieve sperm directly from his testicles. On the fourth try, at Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan, doctors implanted three fertilized embryos in the hope that at least one would develop. They all survived, and the Kunkens were thrilled; both have close relationships with their siblings and were determined to have more than one child. The boys are fraternal rather than identical, and their distinct personalities have already begun to emerge. "They're very different, but they get along great," Kunken says. "Jimmy seems to be the most adventurous. He runs around and is ready to get into mischief, is always wrestling with his brothers and trying to push the limits. Timmy is the thinker—real bright and the more deliberative one who stops and observes

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everything. And Joey's the biggest guy. He's the one who just wants to have a good time."

When the triplets were born, the Kunkens still lived in the same two-bedroom condo he had occupied for two decades. When they bought the house in Rockville Centre, they did extensive renovations to widen doorways, build ramps, and create accessible bathrooms. The boys still share a bedroom, their three cribs lined up in a row and the closet filled with neatly arranged (and non-identical) outfits. When they were infants, Kunken would carry one in a BabyBjörn strapped to his chest or hold all three in his lap; they still love to sit there, but these days only two can fit. A nanny helps care for the boys, and the occasional visiting relative offers an extra pair of hands. "Ken doesn't look at any of this as stressful," says his older brother, Steve. "I think he is looking at every day as the greatest thing that's happened. It's like a new life for him, having them around."

Thirty-seven years ago, when Kunken was gravely injured during a 150-pound

football (now called sprint football) game on the Hill, he scarcely would have dared to dream that it would turn out like this. Back then, the medical and social conventions of the day held out little hope: not only would he never recover, but he couldn't expect much of a future. A career as a district attorney and motivational speaker? A long shot. A successful marriage? Unlikely. And three biological children? Impossible. "When I was at the rehab center, I read a book that talked in great detail about spinal cord injuries," Kunken recalls. "It had a couple of pages on the movement you'd have depending on the level of your injury, where your sensation would be, how it affected your bodily functions. But they also had a page on careers. And the only career I remember them mentioning for someone who was hurt on my level was to sell magazine subscriptions over the telephone. And at that time, I couldn't even dial."

The above was excerpted from an article published in the January/February 2008 issue of *Cornell Alumni Magazine*, and used with permission.

Any brothers interested in connecting with Ken Kunken can e-mail him at kkunken@aol.com, or phone, during the day, at (516) 571-3819, or at home in the evenings at (516) 208-5241.

