The national tragedy of September 11, 2001, affected all Americans. For Riverside firefighter and paramedic Eddie Kronenberger, it became the inspiration he needed to overcome a serious injury. To honor the fallen firefighters who gave their lives to help others that terrible day, Eddie determined that he would do more than recover. He would enter – and complete – the New York City Marathon. This is Eddie’s story…

The Injury

With a wife and three kids to support, Eddie Kronenberger spent his days off from the fire department working for Jeff Bonham Electric. While Eddie was strapping wires to a ceiling on February 19, 2001, his stepladder went one way and he went the other. “The next thing I knew, I was sitting on the floor. I didn’t need to be a paramedic to know that I’d broken my leg,” Eddie says.

It was, possibly, a career-ending injury. Just above his right ankle, Eddie’s fibula was broken and his tibia was fractured in many small pieces. “When we saw the X-rays,” his wife Amy says, “the bones looked like scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.”

Multi-stage Treatment

Treatment began with surgery at Miami Valley Hospital, where orthopedist Daniel Dunaway, MD, performed ankle surgery and installed an...
“external fixator,” much like the halo restraints used when the head must be kept immobile. After three days in the hospital, Eddie was released. His Riverside fire chief and his battalion chief were on hand to walk him to his car and encourage his recovery.

But recovery wouldn’t be easy. At his three-week check-up with Dr. Dunaway, Eddie’s bones had not begun to heal. The doctor prescribed an electric bone-stimulator. When that failed to generate bone growth, Dr. Dunaway suggested a bone graft as a last resort.

The experts were wondering if Eddie might ever be able to walk unassisted again. But “if” is not in Eddie’s vocabulary. “I never doubted I would get back to work,” he says. “It was just a matter of when.”

The bone graft worked. With the bone now healing itself, Eddie was able to have the external fixator removed. It was replaced with a much lighter traditional cast, then a pneumatic boot to support his leg and the ankle muscles that had weakened during his recovery.

Now Eddie’s challenge was to regain his strength and mobility with the help of physical therapy. During his first eight weeks of therapy, the therapist showed Eddie how to “teach” his leg to walk again. He augmented this therapy with daily trips to the firehouse to use the weight room there and another eight weeks of aquatic exercises.

Then, in late October, Eddie was ready for ProWork, Miami Valley Hospital’s industrial rehabilitation program. Through a combination of physical and occupational therapy, ProWork’s “work hardening” builds the muscles and stamina the patient needs to perform his or her own job.

At ProWork

The six-week ProWork process begins with a musculo-skeletal evaluation by a physical therapist and a work performance evaluation by an occupational therapist. A staff member is assigned and a specific program to meet the individual’s needs is designed. Physical therapist Linda Loxley was assigned to Eddie.

“The physical requirements for firefighters are very challenging,” Linda says, “and Eddie was still limping when he arrived at ProWork. But he was very motivated.”

Exercise begins slowly and builds to the goals set for the patient. In Eddie’s case, firefighters have very specific physical requirements. They include:

- climbing stairs;
- carrying and climbing ladders;
- pulling a 70-pound fire hose;
- dragging a 160-pound mannequin on level surfaces and stairs;
- using axes and a pike-pole, which firefighters use to break through walls and roofs; and
- functional lifting tasks, with a goal of lifting 75 pounds from the ground to overhead and carrying them a specified distance.

Physical Therapist Linda Loxley worked with firefighter/paramedic Kronenberger at the MVH ProWork facility to help him prepare to re-enter the job scene.
“We work with Dayton firefighters fairly often,” Loxley explains, “so our therapists performed a job site visit at the Dayton Fire Department Training Center to see first-hand what their job requires.”

The ProWork team uses ingenuity to simulate job requirements. For instance, they use graded weights to simulate pulling the fire hose, adding weight until the task met fire department requirements. They also added weight to the mannequin to reach the weight requirement. “The ProWork therapists taught me to do every task ergonomically,” Eddie says, “to prevent future injuries.”

“For Eddie, we also added a stepladder to the routine and periods of standing in one spot working overhead so he could return to his job as an electrician,” Linda adds. “He was more than ready to return to work.”

ProWork staff also take a holistic approach to providing education. Participants learn about the effects of injury on their life, how to prevent injury and how to facilitate a smooth transition through the rehabilitation process. Other topics include dietary, pharmaceutical information about medications they may be taking, stress management, posture and body mechanics and chronic pain management.

ProWork’s benefits are not limited to patients with physically demanding jobs like fire fighting. “We help office workers return after back or carpal tunnel problems, or assembly line workers whose jobs involves repetitive motion,” Loxley explains. “Patients may not have been injured at work, but their injuries affect their ability to do their jobs.”

Marathon Man
Eddie returned to work December 9, 2001, but while he was still at ProWork, he talked with physical therapist Susan Fisher about walking in marathons. “Not all events welcome walkers,” Eddie says, “but a friend had asked me to sign up for the U.S. Air Force Marathon in Beavercreek. Susan and I talked about the conditioning I’d need for that event. I completed the course in 6 hours, 45 minutes.”

He then decided that the best tribute he could give the 343 firefighters who died on September 11 was to walk the New York City Marathon. He and his family celebrated when they received word that Eddie had won a slot in the lottery by which new participants are chosen. With help from family, friends, local businesses and his own union, he arrived in New York. He immediately visited a firehouse around the corner from his hotel and found that every firefighter on shift the morning of September 11 had been lost to the terrorist attack. Eddie struggles to keep his voice steady when he talks about what happened to men he considers his brothers.

Moved by the depth of the pit where the Trade Towers once stood and by the warmth of the people he met from New York City and from across the nation, Eddie was ready for his first New York City Marathon. He wore the same shirt that he had made for each of his races. It says: “I am walking in memory of all those who lost their lives on September 11, especially my brothers of the FDNY – keep them in your hearts with a smile on your face.”

Along the route, he found that everyone who saw his shirt wanted to tell him their story. That, and the cheers of the crowd, carried him to the finish line in just 5 hours, 50 minutes and 10 seconds.

The staff at ProWork are pleased – but not surprised – by Eddie’s accomplishment. Eddie is glad to be back to work and proud that he could bring attention to the sacrifices of his fellow firefighters through his marathons. Recovering from his injury, he says, was just another challenge in a life that has included many challenges. “My mother, who is almost deaf, always told me that the only limitations you have are the ones you put on yourself,” Eddie says.

To learn more about how ProWork can get you back to work, call 208-4646.