



## “Surviving the Game of Life”

**The story of Brooklyn, NY comedian, Damon Rozier’s, powerful and inspirational life transformation, following a devastating motorcycle accident and resulting spinal cord injury...**

*By Heather High-Kennedy*

Damon Rozier was 27 years old when he hopped on his motorcycle and left an after-school activity at Springfield High School in New York, where he had been reaching out to at-risk kids, in an attempt to provide them with alternatives to lives of violence, drugs and gangs. In one incomprehensible moment, a car making an illegal u-turn clipped his motorcycle, launching both Damon and his bike into the air. Da

mon hit the ground, and a moment later, every ounce of his bike came down on his body, landing on his head, yet the most fearsome element of the ordeal was that he felt no pain at all.

The bike had broken his neck in two places, and as he lay on a hospital gurney, he overheard the grim diagnosis as doctors talked around him: he had suffered a C5 – C6 injury, and he was permanently



paralyzed from the chest down. In the time immediately following the accident, Damon was overwhelmed by the magnitude of his injuries, and feeling too weak to put up a fight, after all he had overcome in his life at that point, he made an attempt at suicide by pulling the IV out of his arm, hoping to bleed to death. What he didn't realize, he later explains with a broad smile, is how long it would take for that to actually happen. Thankfully, nurses intervened, and his life was saved, but the journey ahead was daunting, compounded by the fact that he was the father of two baby boys under the age of two, who depended on him for everything.

Raised in the notoriously underprivileged Brownsville section of Brooklyn, an area historically dotted with public housing projects and plagued for decades with violence, drugs and crime, Damon was a good soul in a bad situation. "I always had a good heart," he comments, "But also a bad one." His father died when he was very young, and his mother married a police officer who harshly mistreated Damon, brewing in him an animosity toward authority figures. As he grew older, a self-proclaimed "product of the streets", Damon succumbed to his environment, and by the time he was a young adult, he was selling drugs and committing crimes, walking out of his house every day with a gun around his waist. Without a dream or plan for life beyond his dismal experience, he spent several years incarcerated. Now speaking

candidly about his life as a good person involved in awful crimes, Damon says, "I could be around anyone and they would pretty much fall in love with me, but at the same time, I was filled with so much hate and resentment, that it kept me on the dark side. I had to forgive a lot of people for me to move on to where I am today... mainly myself."

Out of jail, and struggling with turning his life around, Damon made small strides toward living a better life, including working with Council for Unity, to provide at-risk kids with a family besides the gang, like he was doing the day of the accident. Now, suddenly the paralyzed single father of two boys, Damon faced seemingly insurmountable adversity, and with nowhere else to turn, started a conversation with God about his purpose in life. "At that moment," Damon recalls, "it became very clear that my #1 (priority) was my children. My kids. I was and still am everything to them... I wanted them to feel they had someone. I wanted to give all my love and spend time with them. 'We are here. This is us. Together.'" In that single moment, his life was irrevocably changed.



Damon spent all of his time with his boys from the days they were in preschool until they graduated from high school, doing everything an able-bodied father could do, including managing their baseball teams, and working to put food on the table. Not only that, but Damon joined sports teams, himself, participating in wheelchair rugby and baseball, swimming, and playing

tennis, simultaneously strengthening his body and spirit, while also serving as an example to his kids, and everyone who knew him, of what it means to change a life for the better, and live without limitations. Beginning with the first year after the accident, Damon pushed his way through the New York City Marathon eight times.



“My life really started since I’ve been in a wheelchair,” comments Damon, who, in 2004 found quick success as a comedian on stage, in large part due to a natural charisma, an infectious laugh, and the heart of a fighter. “I figured out how to deliver jokes,” he comments easily, all the while referring to a career in which very few people find easy success. Damon did this, though, by creating powerful material based on his own life-changing experiences, which is as uplifting and inspirational as it is funny. “My life is not easy. My life is extremely hard, but you would never know it because of my attitude.” Flying across the country to do shows and presentations, and also to promote his book, “Surviving the Game of Life”, and in teaching his sit-down, “boot camp” exercise classes, Damon’s goal is to demonstrate his willingness to fight back and give back, showing others that they, too, have the power to change their lives in meaningful ways.

“I don’t consider myself disabled. Why? Because of the things that I do. Now who do I consider disabled? The people who have the ability mentally and physically to do anything they want in the world

and don’t. So I feel there are a lot of real disabled people walking around this earth, calling me disabled, and I’m not. I’m gonna show you different.” It’s this determination that has propelled him in every athletic, career and parental endeavor in his life since the motorcycle accident, and it is the contagious spirit that inspires others to make use of their lives, as well.

Thinking back to when he was a kid, feeling empowered with a gun around his waist, and knowing there are others out there now, thinking there is no possible way to change for the better, he speaks to them, “Stop and reflect on all the pain you’d be causing, not only yourself, but family members, if you use that weapon.” Today, empowered by the will to live a meaningful life, Damon explains the contrast, “When I was playing rugby at a school for the disabled, a boy came up to me and said, ‘You are my hero.’ And I tell you, nobody ever called me a hero when I was on my feet.”