

THE *Current*

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[Nora Drake](#)

Despite extraordinary challenges, undergraduate Andrew Smith prevails

When Andrew Smith graduates this week, it will be the culmination of years of hard work and overcoming setbacks that might have toppled other students. For starters, he probably shouldn't be alive.

Smith was enjoying a typical first year of college in 2017 when he decided to try a skateboard maneuver he had seen many times before: stealthily towing behind a vehicle while riding through Isla Vista. His intention was to use a truck's velocity to propel himself forward down Embarcadero del Norte.

To this day, he doesn't know exactly what happened, but somehow the timing of when the truck accelerated versus when he grabbed onto its rear bumper propelled him underneath the truck, unbeknownst to the driver. The last thing Smith remembers seeing is the grease-stained underside of a box truck as its rear wheels started to accelerate over his body.

"I had a lot of serious injuries that by all means should have won," Smith said. Still, he calls himself lucky. It was lucky that a stranger eating at Freebirds saw the accident and called 9-1-1 immediately; lucky that both of his parents had spent a lot of times in hospitals (his father is a cardiologist and his mom worked as a NICU nurse for years) and could help make medical decisions; and lucky that even though

he begged the paramedics to take him home to San Diego, they rushed him to Cottage Hospital and directly into emergency surgery.

Smith had a crushed pelvis, two collapsed lungs, six broken ribs and his stomach was resting next to his heart (among other injuries). He was in the hospital for five weeks, undergoing multiple surgeries and watching an endless stream of “That 70s Show” reruns. He wondered when might be able to run again. Smith had been a gifted lacrosse player, a member of UCSB’s [club team](#) who relished the sport and the community. Now he was in a wheelchair facing months of physical therapy.

After the accident, Smith withdrew from classes and moved home to recover. He made what he describes as good progress, physically, but did not fully deal with the mental and emotional consequences of his life-changing accident. He had also lost a childhood friend to cancer in the same time span, and the combination of grief and trauma was too much to bear. “I was anxious to get back to UCSB,” he said, “but I pushed myself to come back in January of 2018 for winter quarter. That was entirely too soon.”

Smith found that he lacked the skills he needed to really cope with everything he had been through. “I wasn’t going to any of my classes,” he said. “I had adopted unhealthy coping mechanisms and wasn’t working on myself at all.” Less than two months after returning to campus, he realized that he needed to extract himself from an unhealthy and destructive lifestyle. He withdrew from the university again shortly after his 20th birthday.

It was clear that he needed to make some dramatic changes. Back home in San Diego, he worked with a network of friends, family and professionals to radically alter his life. “I needed to break what my habits had been in an extreme way,” Smith said. By adopting a lifestyle centered around physical, mental and spiritual wellness, he put himself in a position to again make progress towards obtaining his degree. Smith also credits his transformation to complete abstinence from mind- and mood-altering substances.

As he settled into life in San Diego, Smith began to gingerly inch his way back toward academia, starting with some Mira Costa Community College classes that a friend signed him up for as a gesture of good faith. He was feeling pretty comfortable in the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. He used the time in isolation to reflect and rebuild. “I had a unique and privileged pandemic

experience,” Smith said. “I was able to work out, surf twice a day, and work on myself spiritually, physically and academically. I got back to the point where I felt ready to return to campus and finish my degree.”

This time, Smith approached things differently. His first step was to reach out to lacrosse coach Mike Allan (“That club was my whole life here,” said Smith), then to [Gauchos for Recovery \(GFR\)](#). Setting up healthy routines and boundaries was essential.

“[\[Counseling and Psychological Services\]](#) was helpful for me too,” said Smith. “I had a hard time finding my place when I returned to campus. Being a non-traditional student, I was worried that I had aged out of Isla Vista. Being able to talk through that with someone was invaluable. I only wished I had leaned on it more when I was struggling.”

Before his accident, Smith had planned to study economics, but after time spent surfing and fishing during the pandemic, he felt deeply connected to the natural environment. He wanted to devote himself to protecting it, and changed his major to match. He will graduate on June 15th with a B.S. in [environmental studies](#), proudly carrying the university banner and leading his fellow graduates into his commencement ceremony.

His college graduation might be happening a few years later than he envisioned when he moved into his freshman dorm, but Smith feels like he is finally doing it for all of the right reasons — not just for himself, but for the supportive community that was instrumental to his perseverance. “This degree means that I was able to get myself back up with the help of so many people after I’d really knocked myself down,” he said. “I started this, and a lot of people invested resources into me surviving at all. The very least I could do is finish this thing that they have graciously offered to help me with.”

Smith was recently named the recipient of the 2024 Alyce Marita Whitted Memorial Award, presented to a non-traditional graduating senior who has demonstrated persistence in the face of extraordinary challenges. And he is elated to have accomplished another goal, seven years in the making. “I’ve gotten some awards and those are great,” he said, “but to some degree, the real prize for me is just getting to be a normal college student again.”

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