

OM-AZING!

Paralyzed at 13, yoga instructor Matthew Sanford takes his moves to the mat—and inspires others



"Yoga gives me a deep sense of freedom," says Sanford (holding a pose, above left, and teaching class). "I experience my whole body."

Facing a dozen students, Matthew Sanford slides onto a mat, his thin legs pointing straight ahead. "Prepare your minds to do yoga," he says. Moving from row to row, he adjusts backs and shoulders, telling the class, "Wonderful things happen a little at a time."

No one knows that better than Sanford, 41—paralyzed from the chest down at 13, when his spinal cord was severed in a car crash that killed his father and older sister. Crushed by the loss, he struggled with doctors' devastating advice to forget his lower body.

"I was a very athletic kid," says Sanford, who grew up in Duluth, Minn., and has an older brother, "then, for 12 years, I dragged my body around." Focusing on his mind, he graduated from college with top grades and earned a master's in philosophy.

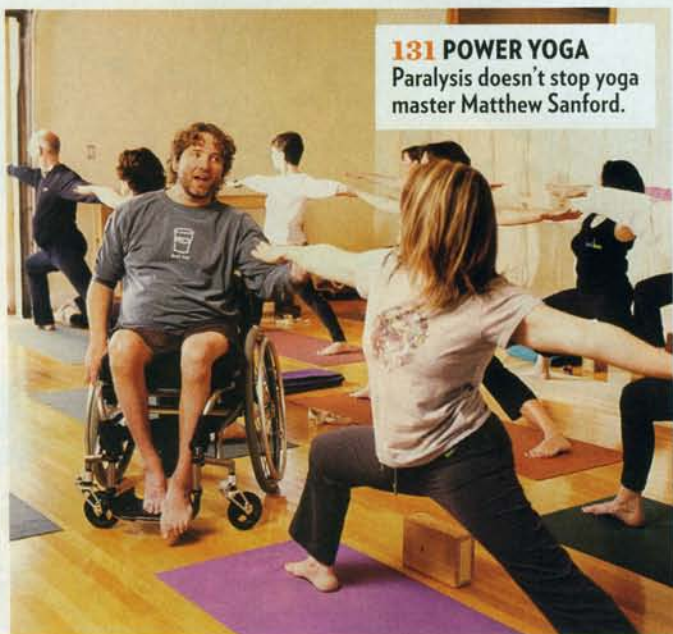
Around that time a friend who was a massage therapist suggested Sanford meet with a yoga teacher she knew. He did and noticed that despite his limited movement, he felt newly aware of his body. Using arm strength and a sense of balance—he places his legs into position with his hands—he has mastered dozens of poses like

"boat" and wide-leg forward bend. "My life's been hard—that doesn't change," Sanford says. "But as I do yoga poses I didn't know were possible, my view expands."

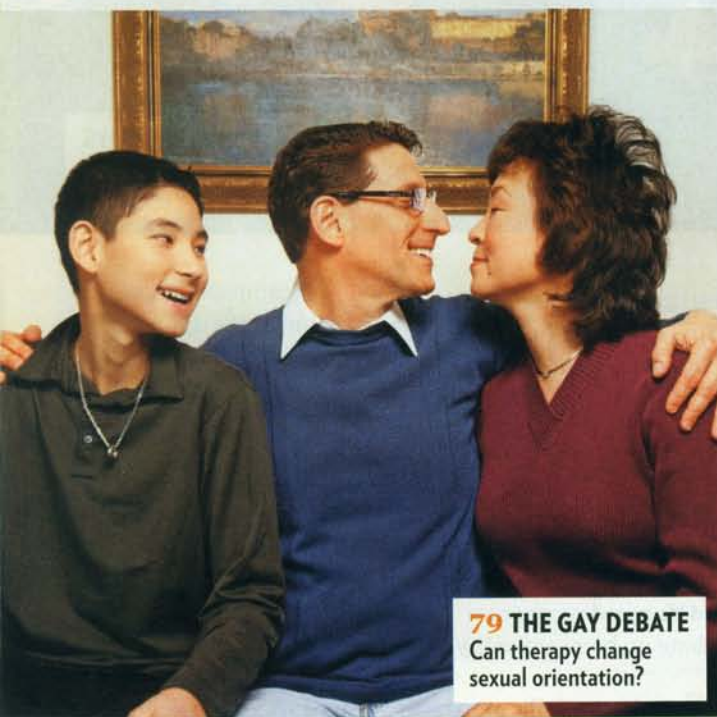
Married to Jennifer, 41, and the father of 7-year-old Paul, Sanford started teaching yoga to disabled students at Minneapolis's Courage Center rehab facility in 1997. Five years ago, Sanford opened his studio, where he teaches mainstream students like Mia Lynch, 39. "He's had a great impact," she says. "I see what he's done in his life and it inspires me to do more with my own." ●

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