Sacramento State students build a future for disabled woman

Sara Granda was 17 when she lost control of her Ford Escort on a rural road between Woodland and Davis, causing the car to roll four times. Her brother, who was in the passenger seat, suffered cuts and scrapes. She sustained a C2 spinal cord injury that left her paralyzed from the neck down.

Now 33, Granda is an attorney with the state Department of Health Care Services. She’s also a first-time homeowner, but traditional residential construction presents accessibility obstacles for a woman who has spent her adult life battling obstacles.

Sacramento State’s Department of Construction Management came to her aid.

“The students’ contributions aren’t just making my life easier, they are making my life in my house actually possible,” Granda says. “They have made one huge thing in my life not so insurmountable.”

Two dozen CM students and faculty members took on Granda’s Davis house as a community service project. To accommodate her wheelchair, they built three ramps to ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) specifications. They constructed two large decks and poured more than 100 square feet of concrete walkways and ramp landings. And they replaced a standard sliding-glass door with wider French doors.

“I will never be able to repay them for the work they’ve done,” Granda says. “It reminds me that not everything in my life will be an uphill battle.”

Granda has been in the news on and off since the July 1997 car accident. She sued Ford Motor Company and lost, claiming that the Escort’s roof was defective and did not protect her from injury. After a fee payment slip-up threatened to block her from taking the California Bar Exam, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the California Supreme Court interceded and she was allowed to sit for the test in 2009. And last year, her specially equipped van was stolen from Davis and later recovered in the Bay Area.

“The project for Sara Granda has been the most rewarding for me to date,” says Department of Construction Management chair Mikael Anderson, who has organized
annual community work projects for his students since 2003. Last year, they built a play structure for toddlers at the Associated Students Inc. Children’s Center on campus.

“Sara experienced a very unfortunate accident early in her life that stays with her to this day,” Anderson says. “She is very inspiring to me and the students. She is so positive to be around. As these students graduate and begin reshaping the landscape of the cities they reside in, it’s my hope that they will continue to give back to those less fortunate.”

Granda earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work at Sacramento State before attending law school at UC Davis. Her father, Jose Granda, is a mechanical engineering professor in Sac State’s College of Engineering and Computer Science, which also is home to the Construction Management department.

She and her dad asked Anderson if he could make her new house accessible.

“It was a time of great despair,” Granda says, “and they have helped me more than I could ever imagine. I will be able to use my house just like my able-bodied counterparts use theirs. I want my life to be like everyone else’s – not better – just the same. That is what the CM students have allowed me: a sense of normalcy.”

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Office of Public Affairs at (916) 278-6156.

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