



Moonlighting

JADE MOON

A 'Mad Dog' Disabled Advocate

Kerupi Aumavae is a big man. Everything about him is oversized. His face is broad and brown, and when I look up at him and smile, the smile he gives back is wide open and bright as the sun.

"Hello, Jade Moon," he says, and extends his good arm. The other, the left one, remains curled at his side.

As Kerupi walks to the place where I will interview him, I see more of what has happened to his body. His pace is quick but he steps with a shuffle and a limp. And when he speaks, the slurred jumble of vowels and consonants tells me what the accident has done to his brain.

"Each step has not been an easy step," his advocate, Howard Lesser, tells me. "He needed occupational therapy, he needed physical therapy, he needed speech therapy, cognitive therapy. He needed exercise equipment ..."

Lesser is with the Hawaii Disability Rights Center. It's a non-profit agency with a mission to protect and advocate for the human, civil and legal rights of people with disabilities. Lesser is good at his job.

"Kerupi," says Lesser, "has given me a nickname of mad dog."

He doesn't look like one. Mild-mannered fourth grade teacher — not pit bull — comes to mind when he shakes your hand. But Lesser is tough, savvy and tenacious. Kerupi's nickname

fits.

Lesser says he started by going back "to places that had previously turned Kerupi down or given him a hard time or caused long delays ..."

"It took months to find out who was in charge of what department that would approve of funds that would get the services that he needed."

Lesser may be persistent, but so is his client. Kerupi has one goal in life — "to be a man." And to him, being a man means being a productive member of society. He wants a job.

He says for too many years after the accident he lived in a hell of helplessness and despair. But he never gave up. In lieu of physical therapy he forced himself to walk for miles every day. He sought help, but the state deemed him mentally retarded and put him on drugs. He could barely speak, and sometimes became violent.

But then an angel came into his life in the form of a counselor from out of state. She didn't think he was retarded. She advised him to seek help from the Hawaii Disability Rights Center. President Gary Smith remembers the day Kerupi walked in.

"He said, for nine years nothing's happened to me," Smith recalls, "I just want something to happen in my life. And that's when I told my staff. We have to help this man get what he wants and

what the law entitles him to."

"It's been a difficult journey," advocate Lesser says. "For me the most frustrating thing is fighting bureaucracy. I do it because I care about the clients that I work with."

Disabilities Act. Smith says it has changed the lives of millions of people by giving them legal muscle, and hope.

"In many respects our society has become more tolerant, more

Lesser did for Kerupi what he could not do by himself.

"Just pushing, pushing, pushing," says Smith, "until the people who had an obligation to him did what they were supposed to do, instead of just waiting while months and then years of his life passed by."

And Kerupi knows it's not a one-way street.

"They only can help me and I myself gotta meet them halfway," he says. He is willing to do that, and more.

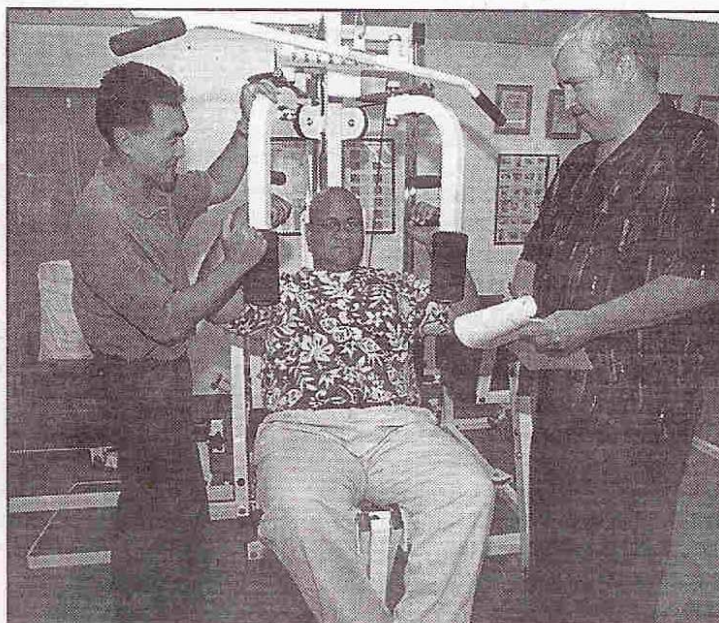
"It's OK to do something and fail, than fail to do something, right?"

Kerupi talks fast when he's excited and I find it almost impossible to understand much of what he says. But I respond to his enthusiasm and to the earnest hope shining from his eyes. He knows his life will never be what it was, but he wants to make one thing perfectly clear. He accepts his disabilities.

"But," he says, slowly and emphatically, "I refuse to dwell on it. I choose to move on and move forward and find a future for myself."

And to his "mad dog" advocate Howard Lesser and center president Gary Smith, Kerupi has this to say — "I like you guys. You guys are the bomb."

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Russell Yamada of Total Fitness Physical Therapy assists Kerupi as Howard Lesser of Hawaii Disability Rights Center observes

And Kerupi's own motivation makes it easy for him to care. "Kerupi pushed me many times in the process. He wanted it done yesterday."

Kerupi may have a better chance of leading a (close to) normal life now than at any other time in our country's history. July is the 13th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with

open," says Smith. "We're more accustomed to seeing people with all kinds of disabilities."

That's a direct result of the ADA. But too many continue to fall through the cracks. Navigating the maze of city, state and federal bureaucracies is daunting for anyone. For a person with disabilities, it can be physically or mentally impossible. Smith and

Nathalie Walker photo