

Far Beyond *the* Chair

A thirst for freedom made Andrew Shelley '03 (EE) take off on the international adventure of a lifetime

by Justin McLachlan

*In 2007, Andrew Shelley suddenly announced that he was quitting his job as an electrical engineer at Lockheed Martin to travel the world. He wanted to meet new people, see new places, maybe even fall in love. He wasn't interested in hitting the usual European tourist destinations. He'd set his sights on more exotic locale: Thailand, Cambodia, India, the United Arab Emirates — places a little more *National Geographic Explorer* than *Condé Nast Traveler*.*

For Shelley, the itinerary was more than a bit of a gamble. He has muscular degenerative disease, a genetic disorder that put him in a wheelchair not long after he finished college. That meant at best, the trip would be difficult. At worst, it would be life threatening. But he pushed that concern far to the back of his mind. After all, he reasoned, even the shower can be a dangerous place for someone with a disability.

Dusty Duprel's first glimpse of just who Andrew Shelley was came in the Craigslist ad he'd posted looking for a roommate in 2006. Shelley — who graduated from USD with a degree in electrical engineering in 2003 — described himself as a backpacker, someone who loves wilderness, the outdoors and adventure. Duprel was intrigued, and the two arranged to meet at Shelley's house to talk about living together.

When Duprel rang the bell, Shelley, whose gaunt frame betrays his medical problems, came to the door without his chair. His walk, hampered by weakened muscles, is an uneasy lumber. At first it caught Duprel off guard, but after they sat down and started talking, all that faded away. "You really see past the chair and everything else fairly quickly," Duprel says.

Muscular degenerative disease attacks the body's muscles, causing them to waste away. Shelly was diagnosed as a baby but has been able to walk, albeit not well, for most of his life. While a student at USD, he'd occasionally use a small scooter to help him get around campus, but he always preferred the freedom of using his own legs.

But soon after graduation, walking grew harder. He started falling and injuring himself so often that it eventually became clear he needed a wheelchair, if for nothing else than his own protection.

He wasn't happy about the idea.

"My thoughts were, 'This is terrible. I don't want a chair. I'm not going to be able to do anything; I won't be able to go anywhere.' It was kind of a depressing thought," Shelley says. Then, in early 2006, he came across a type of chair he'd never seen before. It was made by an Australian company and was specially designed for all-terrain, off-road travel. Shelly was ecstatic. It seemed like the chair was made just for him. "I saw this chair and said, 'Whoa, this is a cool chair. It's got ATV tires. It'll take me anywhere. I can go to the beach, go hiking, mountain climbing.'"

Duprel moved in not long after the two first met, just a few months after Shelley had gotten his new chair. Until he asked Duprel and his girlfriend, Rachel Pandza, to join him on his annual trip to Lake Tahoe, neither had really seen Shelley do much

more than go to and from work. The trip turned out to be another glimpse of the real Andrew Shelley, one that surprised them both when they saw him take to the wilderness around the lake. Duprel describes it: "He's just going on these trails, literally climbing mountains with his chair," he said.

He and Pandza were both film students at San Diego State: They sensed a story. "There was just something interesting about the kind of character that was trying to escape the body and the chair. It was interesting to actually see that spirit of adventure," Duprel said. They didn't know it at the time, but that zest for new experiences was goading Shelley to make a big life change. Not everyone was as sure as he was that quitting his job to travel the world was a great idea; his parents, in particular, had strong reservations. But despite the potential for problems, he opted for the exotic.

"The last thing it seems like Drew considers when he does anything is his disability. It's not factored into anything he does. It's commendable, but at the same time, he puts himself into — what's the word? Predicaments," Duprel says. Meanwhile, Duprel and Pandza had decided to produce a feature-length documentary about Shelley's trip. That meant putting together a film crew and traveling with him. This appeased Shelley's parents some, because they thought — wrongly — that Pandza and Duprel were going along to help Shelley and keep him safe. The reality was they planned to be nothing more than detached observers.

So, in 2007, after months of fundraising to finance the production, Shelley quit his job and Duprel and Pandza took a semester off school. They left the United States a few days after Thanksgiving with little idea what to expect. Despite what they led Shelley's parents to believe, they intended to be nothing more than neutral observers on Shelley's journey, there to document but not interfere or help. It was a role they took seriously. Unless Shelley's life was in danger, they resolved to stay back and out of his way, even to the point that they made the decision mid-trip to start saying in separate hotels and eating meals apart to keep physical and emotional distance between them.

"It allowed him to have his own personal journey without even relying on us simply as friends," Pandza says. In the end, the trip lasted about two months. He traveled the entire length of New Zealand, with short layovers in Australia and China on the way to Cambodia, then Thailand, all the way from the north of India to the south and a last minute stop in Dubai. Then Shelley made the heart wrenching decision to cut the trip short: because the physical toll on his body was becoming apparent. He'd lost five pounds in two months, weighing just 95 on a good day.

"He was progressively going to harder and harder countries to navigate. I think he still thought he could go on, but the way things were, physically, it wasn't going to end well," Duprel said. Shelley's been back in the United States now for about two years, and life has changed. He now plans to become a motivational speaker. His last-minute stop in the United Arab Emirates at the end of the trip was so he could talk to students at the American School of Dubai, where he went to high school. He told them that if he could travel the world in a wheelchair, that they could do anything.

It's a message he hopes Duprel and Pandza's documentary of his trip, "Beyond the Chair," can carry for him when the time comes that he can't. The film is currently in the editing stage, with hopes of having a final cut completed this fall. The prospect brings a smile to Shelley's face. "I've learned a lot," he says. "And I want to share my experiences with others."