Marilyn Hamilton (HE ’71, CRD ’72) is not slowing down—and never will if she has her way.

A revolutionary to some, the heart and soul of a multi-million-dollar company to others, Hamilton has accomplished what many could never do—grow her spirit in the wake of tragedy and touch millions of lives as a result.

Her journey began in 1978 when a hang-gliding accident damaged her spinal cord, paralyzing her from the waist down. Then 29-years old, Hamilton feared her future. She did not stay in that mental place long and began rebuilding her life immediately with support from family and friends.

Hamilton was out of rehab in three weeks at a time when people typically stayed six months to a year. “Recovering at...”
home was much more real to me,” said Hamilton, even though
that meant sleeping in a hospital bed in the middle of her liv-
ing room wearing a body brace. Hamilton had an extremely active lifestyle before the ac-
cident and quickly grew frustrated with “the dinosaur” – the
standard 60-pound metal wheelchair she spent her days in.
“During my first year after the accident, I could not stop
thinking about building a better wheelchair,” she said. “I knew
it could be done and began to feel my whole life had been in
preparation for this idea.”
One day it dawned on Hamilton, while sitting in that di-
nosaur, watching her husband and friends hang glide. If her
friends, Jim Okamoto and Don Helman, could build gliders
in their garage, why couldn’t they make a wheelchair based on
the same technology? One year after Hamilton’s accident, the
“Quickie” wheelchair and company were born.
Every sports wheelchair user soon wanted one. “Quickie
was a revolution that gave wheelchair users a whole new way
to experience the world,” said Hamilton. Weighing between 15
to 25 pounds depending on individual accessories, it was one
of the first ultra-lightweight, fully customizable chairs. The
Quickie was making the dinosaur extinct.
Hamilton began competing in wheelchair tennis and snow
skiing events with the U.S. Disabled Teams, winning national
and international titles, including a silver medal at the 1982
Paralympic Ski Championships in Leysin, Switzerland. The
recognition she received from winning fueled the wheelchair
company’s publicity – along with that great name.
Interestingly it was another Cal Poly alum that inspired
the company’s moniker. Hamilton grew up with
Burt Rutan (AERO ’65) living down the street. The famous aerospace pio-
near and Hamilton’s brother built model airplanes together, fly-
ing them at a nearby elementary school. Rutan is the designer of
SpaceShipOne, the first privately funded vehicle to reach space
and claim the famous $10-million “X Prize” in 2004.
At the time of the wheelchair company’s inception, Rutan
built a wing plane he named “Quickie” because of its small
front wing, which prevented it from stalling. “Our wheelchairs
were quick and responsive,” said Hamilton, “and when my
partner Don Helman suggested we name our chairs ‘Quickie’
after Burt’s planes, we realized it was a perfect fit.”
A memorable marketing campaign followed. Buttons, hats, T-shirts, backpacks and other items were created, all bearing
slogans such as “Nothing beats a Quickie!” and “You’ll never
forget your first Quickie!”
The fun didn’t stop with the slogans. Marketing campaigns
were personalized, with real people in chairs winning sports
events and enjoying real-life activities. Hamilton calls her
company the Apple Computer of the wheelchair industry.
“The vibe was amazing,” she said. “I fed off the energy of our
team of passionate rebels. The business was growing faster
than we had expected – our ‘plane’ was off the runway – and
we were scared to death!”
Even though neither Hamilton nor her two partners had
formal business, engineering or manufacturing education,
they didn’t let that stop them. Okamoto and Helman focused
on design and manufacturing. Hamilton was the catalyst and
marketing-sales generator.
Working around the clock, the three entrepreneurs pro-
duced 61 chairs during the first two years. That number
jumped to 834 chairs the following year when 13 additional
people joined Quickie. Their 200 percent growth rate the first
several years kept up a steady pace in subsequent years.
Production methods were unconventional. Quickie stud-
iied individual clients – understanding their needs and wants
– and became involved in their lives. It was common for cli-
ents to visit the company and meet the employees. Chairs were
customized for each person through fully adjustable compo-
nents and a variety of bolt-on accessories. Every style was customizable, with each client able to choose from
approximately 100 colors.
The company researched existing materials and processes
from other industries, incorporating the best. If a needed re-
source could not be found, they ‘innovated’ new processes and
systems, said Hamilton.
Quickie was sold seven years after inception to Sunrise Med-
ical, with sales eventually reaching $24 million, 25 percent of
which were global. All three original partners have since left,
with Hamilton being the last, retiring in August but still provid-
ing independent business consulting services to Sunrise.

‘DON’T LIMIT YOUR CHALLENGES...CHALLENGE YOUR LIMITS’
Hamilton treasures the memories and more importantly, the company’s impact on other lives beyond designing a better wheelchair. Quickie has sponsored athletes since the beginning and continues to do so. In 1996 it sponsored the first-ever U.S. Paralympic Game in Atlanta and has given millions of dollars to such organizations as Winner on Wheels Foundation, Wheels for Humanity, and Discovery Through Design.

Hamilton is moving forward with a new career as a professional speaker and business consultant, driven by her passion and focus on inspiration, innovation and increasing performance. More information on her life and efforts can be found at www.marilynhamilton.com.

Looking back, there's not much Hamilton would change. "Live everyday with gratitude," she said. "Don't limit your challenges... challenge your limits. Everyday is a gift – find your niche and make a difference."