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 living room wearing a body brace.

Hamilton had an extremely active lifestyle before the accident 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 dinosaur, 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 pioneer and Hamilton’s brother built model airplanes together, flying 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, back packs 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 produced 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 studied individual clients – understanding their needs and wants – and became involved in their lives. It was common for clients to visit the company and meet the employees. Chairs were customized for each person through fully adjustable components and a variety of bolt-on accessories.

Even 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 resource could not be found, they ‘innovated’ new processes and systems, said Hamilton.

Quickie was sold seven years after inception to Sunrise Medical, 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 providing independent business consulting services to Sunrise.
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.”