



PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

Polio victim Gregory Burns (above) never allowed his disability to prevent him from living life to the fullest



**A LIFE LESS ORDINARY**  
**► Wong Kim Hoh**

**I**N 1983, Gregory Burns took part in the Honolulu marathon and, in his own words, “came in dead last”. The then 26-year-old covered 42km in 16 hours, nearly 14 hours slower than the winner.

But he was not powered by sturdy legs. His had been rendered useless by polio since he was 10 months old. He ran on crutches.

“They had taken down the finishing line at noon,” the 47-year-old artist recalls.

When a young man saw him still running at dusk, he alerted a TV crew who soon arrived to interview Burns.

“I was soon on the evening news broadcast across Hawaii. Everyone came out on their

front lawns to cheer me on.”

He finished at 10pm.

The episode is just one of many which has shaped his philosophy in life: “If we are willing to commit 100 per cent, the universe will conspire to help us achieve our goals.”

It’s not a platitude. Burns is a champion swimmer. He has earned five world records and six medals in the Paralympics in Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney. He scuba-dives and body-surfs.

He’s scaled mountains and once backpacked 16 months through China, Tibet, Nepal, India and Pakistan.

He’s worked on radio, written for magazines, made TV documentaries and even led the cushy life of a regional public relations manager for an MNC.

A motivational speaker, Burns is now a full-time contemporary artist whose works have been exhibited worldwide.

He has just written and published his first hardcover book, *Painted Journey*, which chronicles his life and work over the last three decades.

He was born the second of four children to an American

couple who worked for the American Foreign Service. He contracted polio when he was 10 months old in Jerusalem.

“I would lie in bed crying and ask: ‘Why me? Why can’t I run around like anyone else?’ ”

He adds: “But even at five, I understood that there was a trade-off. God might have taken away my legs but he gave me something else.”

Through his grandfather’s connections, Burns remembers games of cowboys and Indians with secret service staff while having his first swimming lessons in the White House pool when John F. Kennedy was president.

A natural in the water, he started competing. In 1996, he set three world records — 100m backstroke, 200m freestyle relay and 200m medley relay — at the Atlanta Paralympics.

“My mother said I was a very good arguer and wanted me to be a lawyer. I did pre-law for one year at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania. But I guess the intensity wasn’t for me. Freshmen were jumping out of windows because they failed their tests,” he says.

Instead, Burns completed a degree in communication studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara.

He laughs as he relates how he lapped up the bohemian 1970s Californian lifestyle — the beach, yoga, meditation.

“After a while, I found myself floundering in too many options, like do I have alfalfa sandwich or lentil soup for lunch?”

He found himself two choices: Take up an offer by the Peace Corps to work with kids with polio in Marrakesh or do a one-year programme to study Chinese painting and calligraphy in Taiwan.

He opted for the latter and on Aug 8, 1984, boarded a plane to a country he did not know much about.

After a spell in Taiwan, he travelled to China with just “a backpack, a few pieces of clothing, paints and brushes”.

Next, he journeyed to Tibet and Nepal, where he trekked 32km from the mountain village of Lukla to Namche Bazaar, the last stop before Mt Everest’s

base camp. Next was a nine-month sojourn through India.

Everywhere he went, he painted. Every now and then, he would go to a post office and send off a box or two of paintings to America.

Burns — who speaks fluent Mandarin — has always surrendered to serendipity, letting life take him where it wants to.

He relates how he was once painting on a beach in Tahiti and looking at a boat in the sea.

Two women came along to chat. Burns discovered that they lived on the boat and were part of a 10-man team making documentaries about Third World countries.

He met the captain the next day and was soon sailing the high seas, helping “to direct, write scripts and sometimes host”.

In the early 1990s, he worked as PR manager for Pepsico in Hong Kong and Singapore. He gave up the job to paint full time in 1998.

He met his fiancée, Angie Tan, within a month of arriving in Singapore.

Home now is split between California and Singapore. In between painting, writing and speaking engagements, he helps out with Very Special Arts, a non-profit organisation that helps the disabled learn through the arts.

He gets philosophical: “You know, if I didn’t have a disability, I’d probably be an all-American jock. I’d probably be 47 with a few dislocated vertebrae, three kids, a beer belly and I’d probably be in Milwaukee, Minnesota, watching a game.”

“Well, I’m as far from that as I can be.”



**A NATURAL:** Burns set swimming records at the Paralympics.

You can visit Gregory Burns’ website at [www.gregoryburns.com](http://www.gregoryburns.com). Send your comments to [stlife@sph.com.sg](mailto:stlife@sph.com.sg)