

Leg amputee shows he's still in the game

By Michel Nolan
Staff Writer

If you're hosting your own pity party, don't count on Bill Nessel to help you.

Bill is a spokesman for the Amputee Connection of Redlands, a support group for people who've had arms or legs amputated.

Three years ago, Bill's right leg was amputated above the knee because of poor circulation.

Before the series of nine surgeries, which eventually took most of his leg, he was active as a San Bernardino County sheriff's deputy.

His focus, he says, was search and rescue. Now, it's the Amputee Connection of Redlands.

Despite his disability, he has a positive outlook.

"Instead of hitting a bump in the road, sometimes you hit a pothole," said the Grand Terrace resident. "It's all about attitude. Sure, it changes your life, but it's not the end. We won't come to your pity party."

You've got to be able to help yourself, Bill advises. "There's a pretty big learning curve — when you're handicapped you do slow down — but you get used to it."

Enter the support group.

"We want to keep it going because we offer people a lot of useful information and resources for their mental health as well as other things," Bill



Courtesy photo

Bill Nessel, spokesman for the support group the Amputee Connection of Redlands, whose leg was amputated because of poor circulation, sits in his hand-cycle that he says looks "like a wheelchair on steroids."

says. "Basically, we're trying to give back to the community."

Although the group averages 10 to 12 men and women from all over the Inland Empire, it has expanded to as many as 40, according to Bill. "It's a transient type of thing. People come to learn how to cope and what to do. A lot of the amputees are diabetics."

His own experience involv-

ed six artery bypasses that failed and an amputation below the knee. After he fell on it, an eighth surgery attempted to repair the damage, and when that didn't work, his leg was amputated above the knee.

A former smoker, Bill admits that smoking contributed to his problem of poor circulation. "The greater majority of amputees we see are that way

because of disease. Amputees who are veterans get support from veterans' hospitals."

Bill, 63, says he is 6 feet 2 inches tall when he's standing and 4 feet 7 inches in his wheelchair. "It gives me two different perspectives in life. At the grocery store I get to see what the kids can see."

Bill is independent and drives a car himself. "I'm a

little buffer than I was before because your body compensates for what you've lost." He has both electric and manual wheelchairs and a hand-cycle that looks "like a wheelchair on steroids."

For gas money, he sells his homemade mustard, a recipe that's been in the Nessel family for 40 years. Wild Bill's Homemade Country Mustard has a bite to it, he says. "But it won't leave teeth marks."

Support-group responsibilities are shared, according to Bill. Bert Horton of Norco leads the group as facilitator, Tom Poling of Cherry Valley serves as treasurer, while Bill handles community outreach.

The group meets from 2 to 4 p.m. the third Sunday of each month at Redlands Community Hospital's new Weisser Education Pavilion, 350 Terracina Blvd. The next meeting on Feb. 19 will include a physical-therapy training film. Meetings always include potluck snacks and White Elephant drawings and prizes. "We raise funds when people buy a ticket, but it's not necessary to purchase a ticket if you can't afford it," Bill said.

For more information, call Bill at (909) 423-0562; Tom at (951) 845-6543; or Bert at (951) 735-7963.

"This is not about me," Bill says. "All our members have their stories."

Contact Michel Nolan at (909) 386-3859 or via e-mail at michel.nolan@sbsun.com.