Where There's a Wheel, There's a Way: A Profile of Alexander "Sasha" Rabchevsky '88

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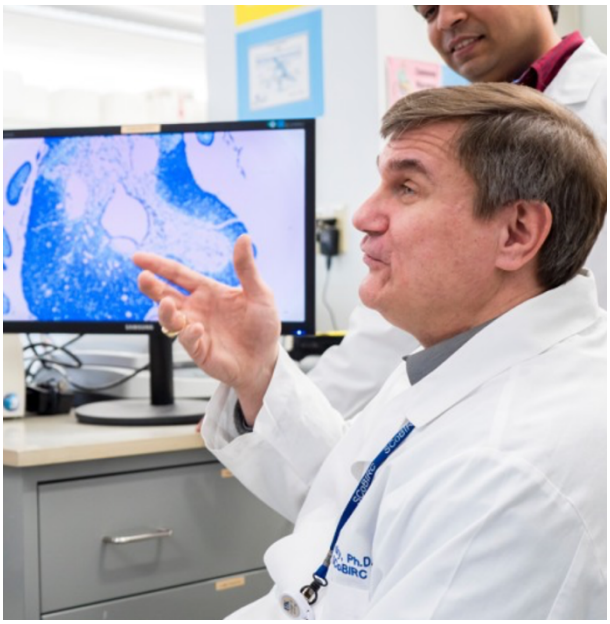
Who is Alexander Rabchevsky?

Dr. Alexander "Sasha" Rabchevsky '88 is perhaps one of the most good-natured and accomplished individuals that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. Our Hampden-Sydney brother went on to study neuroscience at the University of Florida after graduation, leaving the University with a



doctorate in 1995 (Rabchevsky, 2023). He then went overseas to pursue a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Paris XII (Rabchevsky, 2023). It was there that his love of languages came in handy, helping him add French to his already-expansive linguistic repertoire of English, Russian, and German (Jones, 2024). Returning to the States, he was hired as a post-doctoral scholar and soon was promoted to assistant professor teaching at the University of Kentucky, using his "open lab, open life" policy to engage graduate students with his groundbreaking research (Jones, 2024). And what is this research? By studying the ability of lab rodents to recover from traumatic spinal cord injuries and the beneficial effects of maintaining healthy mitochondria, Dr. Rabchevsky hopes that his research will lead to lasting relief and benefit those afflicted with spinal cord injuries, but only time will tell (Jones, 2024). Regardless, it is not hyperbole to say that Dr. Alexander Rabchevsky is among the most accomplished graduates of Hampden-Sydney College.

There's one more thing to know about him: He's a paraplegic.

He wasn't born this way, though. Rather, it was the result of an accident during his time at Hampden-Sydney (Jones, 2024). This accident completely changed the course of his life, but he persevered through most of the obstacles that it threw his way. It never occurred to him, until a recent sabbatical in Vancouver, BC, that society and academia, in particular, had been fostering obstacles in his path of scientific discovery. "I didn't realize that I myself [had been] sort of an ableist by not demanding more rights and actions as I struggled to compete with uprights," Dr. Rabchevsky said in a recent interview (Jones, 2024). Even with his Canadian experience, he had not thought to "tell [his] story" to a wider audience, until he had a visit with H-SC Regional Development Officer Heather Howarth. With her encouragement, he decided to "collect his memories" and came to *The Journal of the Sciences* with his story. "With this article," Dr. Rabchevsky said, "I hope to articulate how to triumph through adversity and lead by example" (Jones, 2024).

Origins

But to properly understand why Dr. Rabchevsky's story is important, we must first dive a little deeper into it. Dr. Rabchevsky, or "Sasha" as he prefers to be called, is originally from D.C. but can call many different places home. His family, which consisted of his parents, his sister Natasha, and himself, moved around a lot during his childhood, living in Maryland, Virginia, and spending summers in West Virginia (Jones, 2024). He inherited his can-do attitude from his Russian immigrant parents; and, all these years later, he still describes himself as "self-sufficient" and a "trailblazer" thanks to their philosophical guidance (Jones, 2024). Then Sasha wanted to go to Hampden-Sydney.

Sasha came to the College with his parents' blessing, even after his mother voiced the usual complaint of "Where are all the women?" (Jones, 2024). He and his parents decided on Hampden-Sydney largely due to the influence of Anita Garland and Dean Lewis Drew, more widely remembered nowadays as Dean Drew. "Upon my visiting H-SC," Sasha recalled "Drew and Nell welcomed us into their home and set the stage for our

decision" (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, February 20, 2024). Because of this influence, Sasha has kept in touch with the Drew family, "exchang[ing] cards yearly" (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, February 20, 2024).

Things were going well for Sasha at Hampden-Sydney. "I came looking to play football and basketball for the College. I guess you could've called me a 'Jock of all trades,'" Sasha joked (Jones, 2024). Throughout his freshman and sophomore years, Sasha performed well at the college. "My GPA was decent but not Med school quality between my sophomore and junior years," Sasha reminisced (Jones, 2024). Although he didn't seem to think so, his position as strong safety on the football team and ability to pursue academics despite that commitment made me think pretty highly of his "decent" GPA (Ungar, 2004).

H-SC and the Accident

The accident happened in the summer just before his junior year. He and a childhood friend were visiting a Russian-American Scout camp in West Virginia on motorcycle. They took one of the many twists and turns just a little too fast and careened down a ravine (Jones, 2024). "The last thing I remember was getting on the motorcycle at a stop before [the Scout camp]," Sasha elaborated, "I came out of a coma weeks later" (Jones, 2024). To ensure his survival, he had been airlifted all the way back home to a Georgetown hospital after an initial triage and prognosis by a local physician at James Madison University. It was at that Georgetown hospital that the doctor delivered the terrible news: Sasha was paralyzed from the chest down (Jones, 2024). Sasha had only just regained consciousness and was still reeling from multiple other fractures in addition to those in his thoracic spine that left him paralyzed. Sasha was discouraged but not defeated, down but not out. As New Mobility magazine later quoted him describing his response, "If there wasn't a cure for spinal cord injury, I wanted to be in a room of authoritative people and have them tell me why not" ("How We Roll," 2018).

Sasha exuded this determination throughout extensive rehabilitation, and he exuded it as only he could. As he told me after the interview, "Early on in rehab with [my] quadriplegic roommate, I adopted Bob Marley's mantra that 'Every man thinks his burden is the heaviest'" (Jones, 2024). Don't think that was just for show, either. "I have held that in front of me ever since in all of my outreach efforts," Sasha added, "that are less compensated by the university as a professor" (Jones, 2024). Throughout all of his difficulties, the weight of which would cause lesser men to crumble in on themselves, Sasha has never forgotten others. In fact, he has done his darndest to make life better for those living with paralysis. "I have and do serve on the board of directors of half a dozen non-profit organizations [as well as] my own Foundation, all devoted to leveling the playing field, accessibility for those with disabilities, and engaging folks will all abilities in outdoor activities not offered in rehabilitation centers that often have abysmal equipment and lack necessary funding," Sasha commented (Jones, 2024).

During his time recovering in the DC hospital, Sasha was visited by several of his Hampden-Sydney brothers and mentors, one of which was Coach Frank Fulton (Parsons, 1987, 6). Sasha later said, "I had a weird feeling that Coach knew I wasn't going to play anytime soon" (Jones, 2024). Many other places might have put Sasha on the backburner after his accident or even prevented him from graduating their institution, but those places aren't Hampden-Sydney. "It was very hard to go back, but [faculty and friends] made it accommodating," Sasha recollected. Dean Drew was one of these friends. Sasha remembers that "[I] was not able to access the commons, and [Dean Drew] granted [me] sole permission to use the microwave in the newest dorms that were just built, and Nell often baked me dinners that Lewis would drop by" (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, February 20, 2024). Sasha was and remains touched by their generosity, so much so that he "honor[s] both him [Dean Drew] and Drs. Shear, Tully, and Lund in [his] annual H-SC pledge" (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, February 20, 2024).

In terms of academics, one professor made it possible for Sasha to continue his education even while still in the hospital (Jones, 2024). "Bill Shear was and is an amazingly gifted teacher who worked with me via old-school correspondence in the late 1980s right after my accident," Sasha maintained, "He and a few other professors helped me to pursue biology courses 'remotely' in order to keep me on track to return and graduate less than an entire academic year behind my original '87 class, despite missing an entire year" (Jones, 2024). As Sasha put it, he had been Hampden-Sydney's "first virtual student" (Jones, 2024). Not only did he receive extensive help from his Hampden-Sydney brothers, but he was soon "awarded [a] biological fellowship at Emory University [in the] summer [of] 1987 with the endorsement of alumnus Dr. Ann Lund" (Jones, 2024). With all of this help and recognition, Sasha was eventually able to resume in-person classes at Hampden-Sydney, taking all of these

A feature on Dr. Rabchevsky's work was published in the Summer 2001 edition of The Hampden-Sydney Record

classes in Gilmer Hall as it was comparatively accessible (Jones, 2024).

From There to Here:[1] **Post-Grad and Current Research**

After graduating in 1988, Sasha moved on to work as a "biology technician at the USUHS [Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences]," according to his biosketch, but this was only a steppingstone on his rise to academia (Rabchevsky, 2023). Soon, he went on to a doctoral program in neuroscience at the University of Florida. Even before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed, the University made every attempt to be welcoming to Sasha, supplying him with designated parking and accessible bathrooms (Jones, 2024). In this environment, as in less-friendly ones, Sasha thrived, earning his doctorate in neuroscience in 1995 (Rabchevsky, 2023).

Then he was offered a foreign postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Paris XII. There, he would primarily study neuroimmunology and cellular transplantation techniques, but he soon realized that he faced the polar opposite of the University of Florida. "Paris [was] not accessible at all," Sasha told me with a look of disappointment behind smiling eyes, "I had to have my newfound medical school friends cut the bathroom doors with a Saws-all to fit into the stalls [with my wheelchair]" (Jones, 2024). "It was a culture shock," he elaborated, "Travelling in a wheelchair through Europe in the 1990s before cellphones was not easy" (Jones, 2024). Still, if there's one thing to remember about Sasha Rabchevsky, he's persistent. This persistence amazed all those around him, including relatives who came to visit. "My father, George, visited me several times to venture outside of Paris," Rabchevsky reminisced, "each time in complete dismay at how I managed to navigate both the local dialect and inaccessible apartment and workplace" (Jones, 2024). Given this persistence, it should come as no surprise that, in response to my question about his greatest joy during his graduate and postgraduate programs, Sasha later replied that it was "overcoming obstacles to

[1] *From There to Here* is Dr. Rabchevsky's short autobiography written in 2004.

receive accolades, despite the unfairness of the slope" (Jones, 2024). He completed that program in Paris in 1997 and came back to the States ready to take on the world (Rabchevsky, 2023).

Sasha took a job at the University of Kentucky's College of Medicine, one that he thought, as a young postdoctoral scholar, was going to be temporary. God must have chuckled then like Sasha did when he informed me that he had been working there for 25+ years (Jones, 2024). It turns out that the University of Kentucky was one of the best places that Sasha could've been in the whole country, and this was because of the state tariffs of all things. "Portions of speeding and drunk driving tariffs in Kentucky go to spinal cord injury research," Sasha explained to me (Jones, 2024). Even though these tariffs did not do away with that necessary and necessarily difficult half of what Sasha told me was the professor's workload, namely "maintaining funding" for one's lab, those tariffs certainly enabled Sasha and his colleagues to do some phenomenal research at UK (Jones, 2024). Although they are very useful, Sasha would have been remiss if he did not add that the tariffs "provide less than a quarter of what Federal grant dollars can provide" (Jones, 2024).

Sasha's research, as much as he could simplify it for an interviewer like myself, follows. He first began experimenting with lab rodents. According to an H-SC Record profile of alumni Sasha would "inflict spinal cord injuries on rats [using] a carefully calibrated weight [to] cause paralysis" ("Sasha Rabchevsky '88, Neuroscientist," 40). Never fear; according to the article, "the rats… [would] recover from this injury in a few weeks [while] humans subjected to equivalent impacts [would] never walk again" ("Sasha Rabchevsky '88, Neuroscientist," 40). This rodent resilience riveted Rabchevsky. He simply had to find out how these little creatures could recover so quickly from fractures like his own.

Enter the second phase of his research. Sasha, intrigued by the then-burgeoning STEM cell research field, began looking into different applications of STEM cells. What he found then deviated from what several researchers were thinking about STEM cells but has recently gained more attention (Jones, 2024). As Sasha put it in his interview, "My research hypothesizes that stem cells donate healthy mitochondria. Mitochondria are the life-and-death switch of the cell" (Jones, 2024). Perhaps, he maintained, we may be able to heal spinal cord injuries if we could "deliver healthy mitochondria to spinal cord injuries" (Jones, 2024). Sasha smiled all through this part of the interview – as with most parts I should add – but I could just feel his smile beam even brighter when he told me later that "the field [of mitochondrial research] is burgeoning!" (Jones, 2024).

Lest the reader believe that Sasha was content to experiment only on other organisms, consider his revolutionary implants. Early on in the realm of his spinal cord injury research, Sasha volunteered for an experimental procedure involving electrode implants. As a Lexington Herald article describes the procedure, "In a 12-hour procedure in Cleveland… surgeons placed eight electrodes in the muscles of Rabchevsky's lower back, buttocks, and upper legs… The 13 surgical cuts included a seven-inch slice in his abdomen for the system's transmitter" (Isaacs, 2002). The entire process was a longshot. As the Herald reported, "Months of recovery are required before the first chance to stand" (Isaacs, 2002). But, on the 19th of April in 2002, Sasha Rabchevsky stood up (Isaacs, 2002). He doesn't walk without the system. He can't walk for a long time. But make no mistake, Sasha Rabchevsky can walk (Issacs, 2002). The system works. Scores of students and peers got to see him walk when he gave the Keynote Address at the first joint National & International Neurotrauma symposium in Tampa, FL, in October of 2002, when Sasha told them that "Many times, the best way to give results is to just show them" (Rabchevsky, 2002). He emphasized all throughout that speech that "we [scientists and clinicians] really [need to] start getting closer to the injured people and asking what they want" (Rabchevsky, 2002).

Sasha is wholly devoted to helping those like himself, spending as much time as possible to further their interests. And he always works toward this goal. Not two days before this article's deadline, Sasha emailed me, ecstatic about a new opportunity that he had found with an old friend of his. Dr. Rick Hansen, a man who is a "paraplegic icon in Canada" and whose foundation "funded [Sasha] as a graduate student at the University of Florida," reached out to him with an "innovative" idea, Sasha gushed to me (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, March 7, 2024). The two would join forces and begin an "Institute of Spinal Cord Injury Translational Research (ISCITR)" (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, March 7, 2024). This organization would, in Sasha's words, "operate separately from academic research centers to avert and overcome the myriad of obstacles that intellectual property and mushrooming administrations present in delivering meaningful remedies and solutions to paralyzed individuals because evidence is clear that society overfunds pre-clinical enterprises that have

delivered very little for me or Rick or any of our comrades, after hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent with very little to no accountability, whatsoever" (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, March 7, 2024). Like a locomotive thundering down the track, Sasha Rabchevsky always moves toward his goal of access, comfort, and mobility for all.

This unwavering devotion to the benefit of those who live as he does, who live without control of much of their bodies, permeates what he considers to be some of his most important research. This research, as Sasha told me during our interview, concerns "uncontrolled blood pressure elevation during assisted defecation or urination or unperceived pain below the injury level after paralysis" (Jones, 2024). Sasha, understandably, is very emphatic on the importance of this research. As he said in an article for New Mobility, "While we're waiting for a cure to walk or use hands, I want to be able to pee and poop and piss and have sex" ("How We Roll," 14). Not being able to control bodily functions, and even risking seizures due to higher blood pressure from attempting to do so, is not a fate that many can imagine or wish to. Unfortunately, researchers refusing to deal with this topic often prevents societal awareness, where focused efforts could make living with paralysis so much more accommodating.

The Vancouver Epiphany

Vancouver convinced Sasha of this truth. In his interview with me, he called it his "epiphany" (Jones, 2024). "I was treated indifferently by the society over there," he said, "The collegiality aspect [at the institute] was a mix of grace and dismissal; I felt I was treated like a post-doc instead of an established, visiting professor who is also paraplegic" (Jones, 2024). It was like being put at the children's table when you brought your own children to the party. More than pure collegiality, there was also a distinct lack of accommodations provided by both the university and the hotels. For many, "accommodations" might mean a lack of "access to the gym and pool and restaurant and laundry room," which is certainly something Sasha underwent (Jones, 2024). But the accommodation that Sasha was most concerned with was something far more basic, so basic so as to be taken for granted by most. "Accommodations include having a secure pot to pee and poop in," Sasha explained, "and none of my hotels or most buildings on campus at UBC [the University of British Columbia] provided anything remotely close to any USA-standards, even at Marriott's" (A. Rabchevsky, personal communication, December 18, 2023). Sasha concluded his comments on the sabbatical by stating, "In Canada, instead of ADA, they say, 'Sorry' with a smile!" (Jones, 2024).

Why was Canada so different from the United States in the way that it treated people with disabilities? One reason that Sasha offered was the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). "ADA is huge," Sasha said in his interview (Jones, 2024). It requires businesses, institutions, and other establishments to make efforts to make their venues more accessible. In a world where people typically avoid thinking about those with disabilities, this law is all the more important. "The term 'disability can be deemed akin to drug addiction," Sasha told me later, "Unless it affects you or a loved one, then a debilitating condition is not your problem… until it hits you" (Jones, 2024). Unfortunately, even a noble, vital policy like ADA has its drawbacks, namely that a lot of people dislike or even fear discussing it to the point that it is "woefully violated on a daily basis country-wide, with impunity," according to Sasha (Jones, 2024). "People [are] worried about being sued," Sasha lamented (Jones, 2024). Ironically, this has led to some institutions stagnating in regards to accessibility. Despite its advancements, "H-SC even today is an inaccessible place," Sasha maintained (Jones, 2024).

Where ADA falls short, Sasha Rabchevsky tries to measure up. "I've been around longer than the ADA," Sasha related, "I've been doing this for 40+ years" (Jones, 2024). And how can one man help fill in the gaps of a national policy? The answer is by blending advocacy and community service in the form of various organizations. In terms of advocacy, Sasha is also "Vice President and cofounder of the Kentucky Congress on Spinal Cord Injury and currently serves as President of Unite2FightParalysis.org – headquartered in Minneapolis, MN" (Jones, 2024). "[I am] also a longstanding board member and advocate for No Barriers USA – headquartered in Fort Collins, CO,"

Sasha said (Jones, 2024). “We take paraplegics, quadriplegics, those with cerebral palsy, amputees, etc. rock-climbing, kayaking, scuba diving, and [on] other physically challenging adventures,” Sasha elaborated (Jones, 2024). Our Hampden-Sydney brother is truly making an impact on the world around him, the same sort of impact that we should all strive to make.

Where There’s a Wheel, There’s a Way

Dr. Alexander “Sasha” Rabchevsky is perhaps one of the most good-natured and accomplished individuals that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. He has cared deeply for others throughout his life, making friends in foreign nations just as easily as back home. He has pioneered new methods of treating those living with paralysis, making their wellbeing his life’s work. He has advocated for those with disabilities, doing everything in his power to convince society of the importance of their needs.

There’s one last thing to know about Sasha: He’s our brother.

And, as our brother, he has some parting words. To those reading his life’s story right now, Dr. Rabchevsky would like to say: “Be an alchemist, take what tools you’ve got in your arsenal to craft the outcomes you desire” (Jones, 2024). Sounds hard? It may be. Sounds tiring? It probably will be. Sounds impossible? It isn’t. As Sasha always says to his students, his campers, his friends, “Where there’s a wheel, there’s a way” (Jones, 2024).

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