



## MONTEREY COUNTY WEEKLY

Takes the Cake: When speaking to kids through the Special Needs Crusade or the Boys and Girls Club, Jonathan Schanz's message is, "It's amazing what I'm capable of, and what I can overcome." Photo by [Nic Coury](#).

### **Heroes Real and Fictional**

#### **A magnetic Marina man defies cerebral palsy to conceive a novel and inspire others.**

Jessica Bray – Monterey County Weekly - Thursday, March 8, 2012

Spend enough time with Jonathan Schanz, and you see a telling transformation take place. The initial impression – of a thin 26-year-old man with halting speech, prominent cheekbones, curled tongue and arm muscles contracted tightly into his wheelchair – melts away. His wide brown eyes make contact. His enthusiasm consumes the room. Then he starts a narrative that comes effortlessly and takes his listeners into another world.

That world is the fictional career of a renegade CIA agent set off by the assassination of his wife to work as a gun for hire, often teaming with one-time adversaries like the Russian mob.

"These are the kind of people you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley," he says. "These are guys who know how to fight, and fight well, but they care about each other."

It's vivid stuff he recites, as if Schanz has been living with these characters for years. In many ways, he has.

Pacific Grove resident and school district secretary Laura Emerson met Schanz during a party at his Marina group home. Until then she hadn't spoken to someone with his type of cerebral palsy; Schanz has a severe tongue thrust, which puts his tongue in the way of his teeth when he talks and swallows. Initially drawn by his calm demeanor, Emerson was surprised at the ease of their exchange, and what else she discovered within it.

“It wasn’t his disabled body, but his good mind,” she says. “His intellect and personality that live in that body are very smart, articulate, funny and compassionate.”

A writer herself, Emerson had just begun to use a voice recognition program to write her short stories, after finding typing disruptive to her creative process. She extrapolated how much freedom it could give someone like Schanz, who types slowly and painstakingly with a single finger. Only the program can’t recognize Schanz’s speech.

Schanz had never heard of cosmologist Stephen Hawking, nor the predictive typing program used to create his complicated lectures. But she figured a similar program, or one that can be customized to recognize Schanz’s speech patterns, could help him match the vocabulary and dexterity needed to write a book. Emerson began seeking out support for such a technology, utilizing Schanz as a model for technology that could benefit thousands.

“Just think of all the people like him who can’t communicate [like they might],” she says. “We should use Schanz’s talent to create something that can help others.”

Schanz has wanted to be a writer since he was 8 years old. He studied geography at MPC to learn what cities spies might frequent, and history to learn how a spy might be shunted from one government agency to another. He also draws inspiration from newspapers: He first began to base fiction on fact after spotting an article about a man who was poisoned in 2007.

“I have such a beautiful imagination,” he says. “I’m like a human historian trapped in a wheelchair.”

Schanz is so energized by his ideas that he shares them through speeches to elementary school children with the Special Needs Crusade and the Boys and Girls Club. The message: “It’s amazing what I’m capable of, and what I can overcome” – and they can do the same.

Those talks helped him earn a nomination for client of the year from Hope Services, a local nonprofit that provides activities, job training and counseling for people with developmental disabilities. In one speech, he expresses his hope that people with disabilities can someday be looked at as a source of strength.

Schanz says his imagination is a survival instinct. When others say they hate their lives or lash out, he retreats into his story, using the experiences as fuel to push his plot forward. His caretakers got him a T-shirt that reads, “Be careful or you’ll end up in my novel.”

He started the book in 2005, and writes six days a week. His one-finger typing produces about a paragraph an hour, and he’s managed to piece together 15 chapters. He says the isolation of his disability gives him the strong train of thought needed for his laborious writing method – not that he isn’t excited about the possibilities voice recognition could provide.

In the book, his protagonists navigate scary places but emerge empowered. “It’s a dark place,” Schanz says, “but in the end everything works out.”

Learn more about Hope Services, including donations and volunteer programs, at [www.hopeservices.org](http://www.hopeservices.org)