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Robert Aliano, who was critically injured in a hit-and-run accident in 2008, walks along Cedar Beach in Mount Sinai.

■ Video: newsday.com/LILife

The comeback kid

Since his near-fatal accident, Robert Aliano has used grit, determination and karate to kick-start his life

PHOTOS BY **RANDEE DADDONA**

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Robert Aliano knows what it is to fly. He's gone up, up, up, higher than the wires that run between utility poles. He flew with such force that his boots blew off his feet.

Then he crashed onto the pavement.

On Nov. 8, 2008, the Quinnipiac University senior from Miller Place was struck in a hit-and-run while crossing the street near his off-campus house in Connecticut. He suffered a traumatic brain injury so severe that fluid was oozing from his ears. The force of the impact punctured both of his lungs, burst his bladder

and broke ribs, fractured his right ankle and broke a bone in his right arm.

"Do you want to see?" Aliano, now 31, asks in a voice left gravelly by a tracheotomy he needed for a time to breathe. He lifts his shirt to show deep gashlike scars in his abdomen where doctors initially held his sides together

using a Velcro-like closure so they could get in repeatedly for medical procedures.

Since 2008, Aliano has harnessed superpowers other than flying — grit, determination, a will to live — to come back from a vegetative state.

"During the initial phase of his rehabilitation with us . . . we were not even sure if he



Robert Aliano, center, attends class at East Coast Black Belt Academy in Middle Island. He wears sneakers to support his right ankle, which was fractured in the accident.



Lori Aliano holds a photograph of her son Robert when he first opened his eyes after an accident left him in a vegetative state.



Nick and Lori Aliano of Miller Place look through photographs of their son Robert and their five other children.



ON THE COVER. Robert Aliano, 31, practices strength and coordination with sensei Jerry Figgiani at East Coast Black Belt Academy in Middle Island.

would emerge and wake up. I wouldn't have been surprised if he never walked again," says Dr. Gary Galang, who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation with a subspecialty in traumatic brain injury.

Galang was Aliano's doctor during the four months Aliano spent after the crash at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in West Orange, New Jersey.

But after 10 grueling years,

Aliano not only walks, he can run on the beach near his parents' home on Long Island Sound where he now lives. He has finished his Quinnipiac degree and earned a black belt in karate. He still faces perma-

nent physical limitations and such issues as memory loss, but he's doing better than his doctors ever expected.

"He is still an outlier," Galang says about Aliano's recovery. "Considering how

severely injured he was, and what he's accomplished, he's the exception, not the rule."

Aliano and his karate teacher, Jerry Figgiani, 59, owner of East Coast Black Belt Academy in Middle Island, now travel to Long Island high schools to talk to students about never giving up and about making smart

See COVER STORY on E6

Kick-starting his life

COVER STORY from E4

choices — Aliano had been drinking the night he was hit by the car. Students watch a video about Aliano's childhood, accident and recovery, and Aliano always gets a cheer from the crowd when he then takes the stage.

GIVING EVERYTHING HE HAS

Aliano was hit at 1 a.m., after he'd been out at a bar for 10-cent beer night. He was trying to catch up to two friends on the other side of a four-lane road.

"He thought he had enough time to make it. We don't tell kids about drinking and walking," says Aliano's father, Nick, 63, who owns Aliano Real Estate of Miller Place. The driver fled the scene and hasn't yet been found; witnesses described the accident to the Aliano family.

When Aliano was hit, he was one semester from graduating and already had a marketing job lined up at 1-800-FLOWERS. At Yale-New Haven Hospital, "they told us to make funeral arrangements," says Robert's mother, Lori, 58.

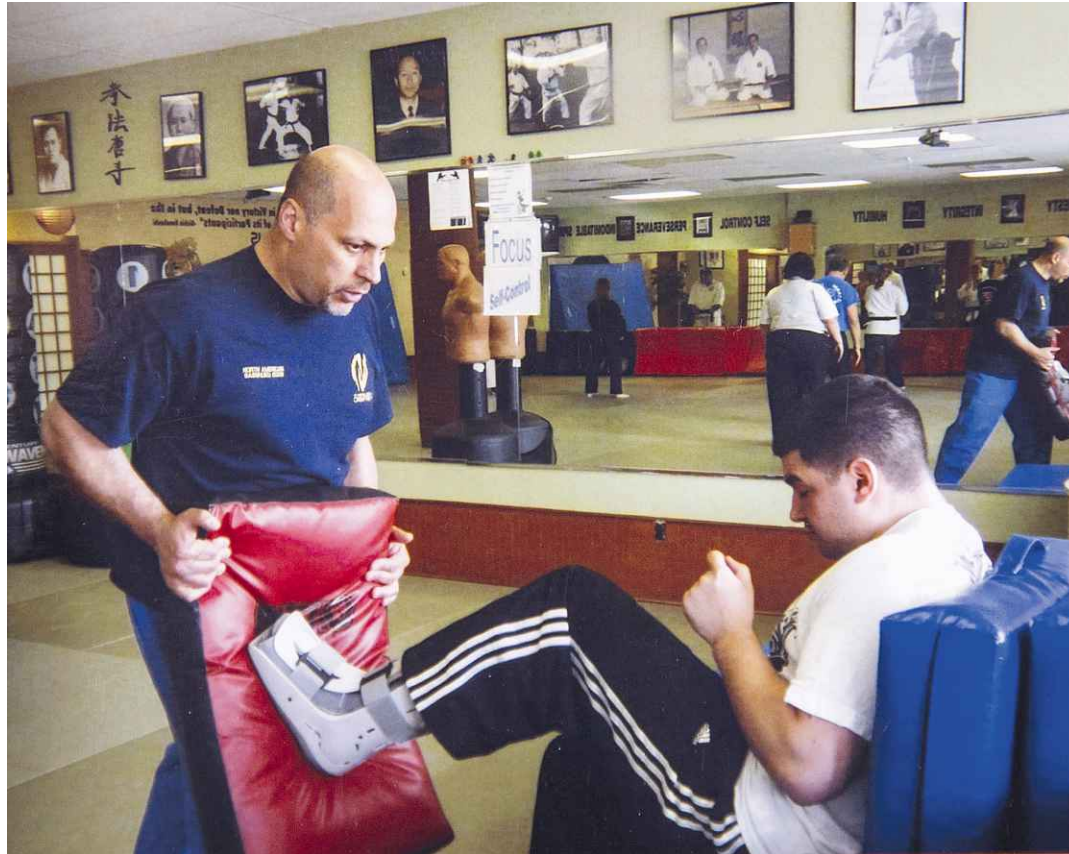
Robert is one of six children. Lori, who wasn't working outside the home then, was able to stay with Robert through his months of treatments while the older Aliano siblings, who all live in Miller Place, helped with the two younger ones, who were still in high school.

Robert struggled to re-learn simple things; for example, it took him months to be able to follow a simple command like handing a medical therapist a ball. Robert came home in April 2009, on the day before Easter. The Alianos turned half of their four-car garage into a gym for Robert, and he did five therapy sessions a day.

"They were doing this for me, so I'm going to give it my all. Give it everything I have," Robert says he decided.

But physical, speech and other therapies can get boring. Even Galang, now director of traumatic brain injury at University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, agrees that boredom can affect the progress of rehabilitation. And Robert didn't want to go anymore.

One day in 2010, when Nick



Jerry Figgiani, left, owner of East Coast Black Belt Academy, began working with Robert Aliano in 2010.



Even at the young age of 6, Robert Aliano got a kick out of karate.

was driving Robert home from speech therapy at Southampton Hospital, they decided to visit Figgiani, who had been Robert's karate instructor when he was younger.

Figgiani, Nick remembers, had called him after Robert's

accident. "I never really called him back because a lot of people called," Nick says. "We put him [Robert] in the wheelchair, and I wheeled him into karate."

Unknown to the Alianos, Figgiani's nephew had been in a car accident four months before



Robert Aliano, in red helmet, wrestles in the Rick Herman Memorial Tournament at Bellport High School in 2004.

Robert's and was still in a vegetative state. Seeing Robert brought tears to Figgiani's eyes. "Is there anything you can do for Robert?" Nick Aliano says he asked Figgiani.

"He was in pretty bad shape when his father wheeled him

in," Figgiani says. "His right arm was all atrophied. He was really skinny. He just was very broken."

Figgiani, who lives in Middle Island and this year will be inducted into the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame, tested the strength in Robert's hands. He thought Robert would be comfortable working on the mats in the karate studio because Robert had been captain of the Miller Place High School wrestling team for years. "After a minute, he said, 'I'll make him a black belt,'" Nick Aliano recalls.

Figgiani says he wasn't as confident as he sounded that day: "I thought I could just do something with him in the wheelchair, have him mimic some movements. I wasn't even thinking about his legs at that time because the doctor said he would never walk again."

Says Robert: "He thought he'd just teach me from the chair, like to box and stuff. He didn't expect me to stand up and be able to walk."

HE'S STANDING

But working one-on-one with Figgiani on strengthening exercises week after week, Robert showed what an athlete he still was — and what drive he had.

"I started to notice his range of motion with his knees," Figgiani says. "He started to lift them higher. I told him, 'If you continue to develop the muscles in your legs, one day you'll be able to stand.'"

The two worked together almost as if they were dancing, Figgiani explains. "I had to spot him. I couldn't let him fall," he says.

One day, Robert Aliano says, Figgiani asked him: "What happens if I just let go?"

"He was kidding," Robert says. "I said, 'Go ahead.' I wanted to see. He let go. I wanted the chance to try."

Says Figgiani, "His mother was there and she was like, 'Oh, my God, he's standing.'"

Soon, Aliano walked. And he kept improving. In 2017, Aliano earned his black belt.

"Can he feed himself? Yes. Can he stay home by himself? Yes. Can he go swimming by himself? Yes," Figgiani says. "He

See COVER STORY on E8



Kate Villeia, 17, expresses gratitude to Robert Aliano after his presentation — about making smart choices — with Jerry Figgiani last year at Longwood Senior High School.



Jawaan Sween, right, 17, was moved by Robert Aliano's talk at Longwood High School about his recovery from a near-fatal crash.



Jerry Figgiani, rear, shows Robert Aliano an exercise at East Coast Black Belt Academy in Middle Island. Aliano began working with Figgiani after he suffered a traumatic brain injury in a hit-and-run crash in 2008.

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Robert Aliano prepares a meal for himself. He's become increasingly self-sufficient since he suffered near-fatal injuries in a hit-and-run crash in 2008.

Robert Aliano's true grit

COVER STORY from E6

doesn't need a wheelchair, he can walk right into the dojo. He gets changed. He puts his karate uniform on. It's exhausting what he does every day.

"What he has achieved and overcome, it's just amazing," Figgiani says. "It's all because he bought into that black-belt mindset. He doesn't know the word quit. Robert gives me hope that one day my nephew will wake up as well."

'BORN TO BE A FIGHTER'

Along the way, Aliano finished his bachelor's degree in marketing working online and with a teacher, and he walked in the Quinnipiac graduation ceremony two years later than planned. He re-learned to swim and to drive. He won a Texas hold-em poker tournament on Long Island. He worked as an assistant in a preschool and is currently hoping to work as an assistant in a physical therapy center.

"He still has problems with motor control. One side is weak and spastic. But he continues to work through and around those," says Galang, who no longer treats Aliano but keeps in touch with the family. Aliano meets with a personal trainer at least once a week in addition to practicing karate.

Galang and Figgiani credit Robert's family for giving their son every opportunity to get better. The Alianos give the credit to Robert.

"He was just born to be a fighter," says Catherine Calandrino, 34, one of Robert's siblings. "Even the paramedics said . . . nobody bleeds that much from his ears and lives."

Mark Lipsky, the executive producer for movies including "Another 48 Hours," "Coming to America" and "The



Robert Aliano's comfort dog, Dexter, joins him when he eats and watches TV.

Nutty Professor," says a script is in the works to make a movie about Aliano.

"His story is somewhat 'Rocky'-esque," Lipsky says. "What he has overcome is pretty amazing."

Meanwhile, Aliano and Figgiani visit Long Island schools; most recently they were at Miller Place High School on March 26.

"I says to Robert, 'Let's turn a bad thing into a good thing. Let's face it, you were drinking that night, a bad thing happened. Let's try to teach other kids,'" Nick Aliano says.

Robert's parents attend all the school visits; Lori walks around the audience holding the microphone for kids who want to ask Robert questions.

"There's always one kid who asks does he ever think of committing suicide?" Lori says. "He'll say, 'You only have one life. There's nothing that you can't accomplish.'"