

# Running on INSPIRATION

**Taryn Gillespie**  
The Rural Messenger

**O**ne minute you aren't feeling well and chalking it up to being pregnant. The next you wake up in a hospital, no longer pregnant, and look down to find your leg is gone. For Liz Willis, this nightmare came true.

"Seven years ago, I lost my leg in labor and delivery due to complications of undiagnosed Crohn's disease," Willis said.

"When I woke up, I had asked my husband, Buddy, if our son had been born. He re-

sponded, "Yes, he is okay, but you had some complications."

I asked what kind of complications and he proceeded to inform me that, I had Crohn's disease, I had been unconscious for 10 days, and my leg had been amputated. When I was told all of this at once, I was confused, but very grateful because I realized at that moment how close I was to never enjoying a day of my son's life.

So from that day on I was committed to recovering and living a life of gratitude."

Throughout all this, with her running career looking grim, Willis stayed hopeful,

and thankful to still have her life. Getting a prosthesis, and learning how to do daily tasks again was her next goal.

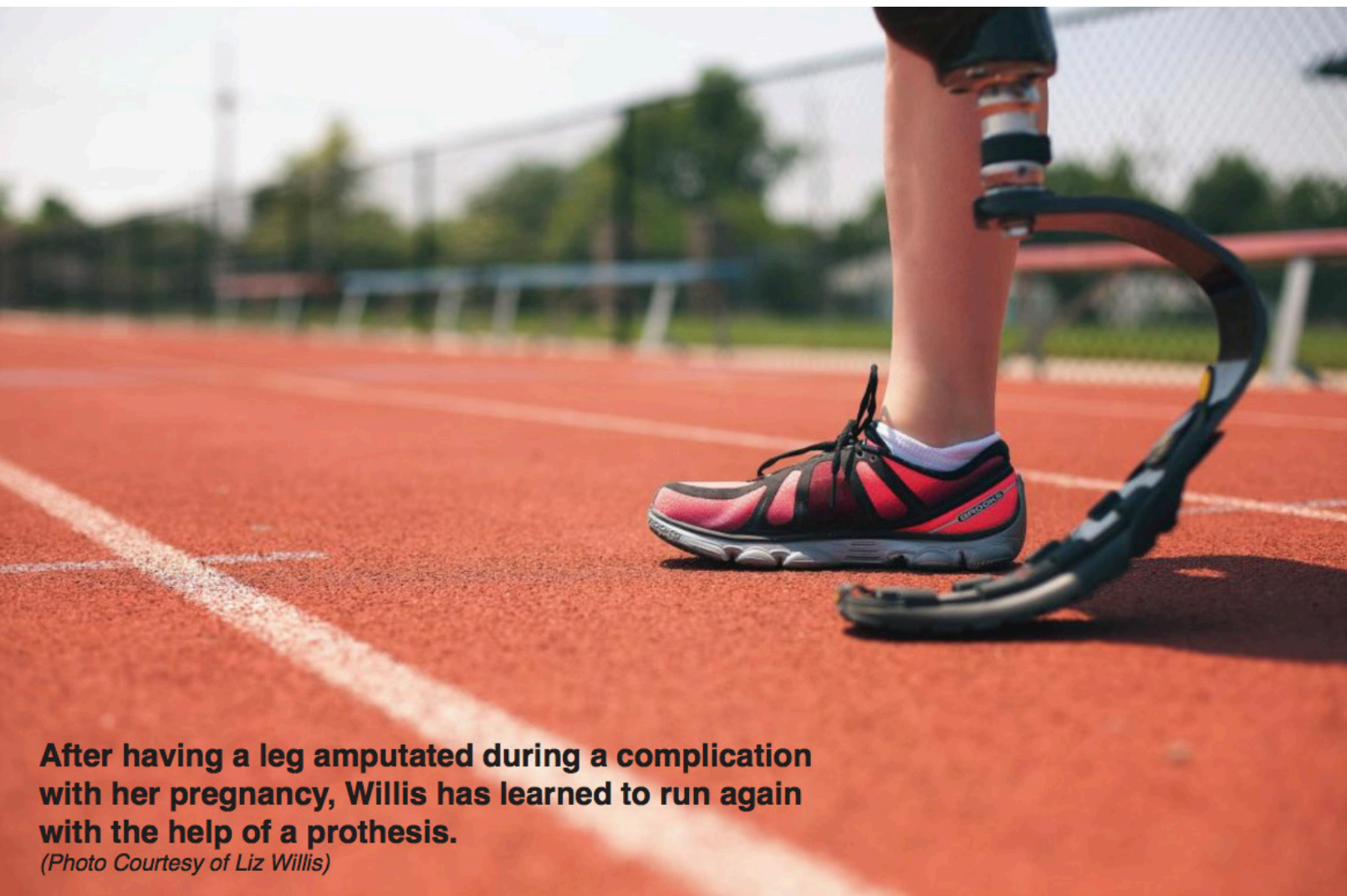
"My son was my motivation," Willis said. "I wanted to walk before he walked and I beat him by six months. I wanted to know what it was like to walk and hold my child. Running had always been an enjoyable hobby for me and I wanted to use it as a means to get back into shape."

After learning how to walk again, while simultaneously raising a newborn, Willis was able to start running again. Running had always held a special place in her heart, Wil-

lis dreamed of being able to go out and let loose on the track as she had many years before.

"The biggest obstacle was building up muscle mass because my leg had atrophied over the 1 ½ years it wasn't required to exercise," Willis said. "I started off with running 1 minute and each day I made a goal to add another minute. By three months I had completed my first 5k and my first ½ marathon was completed in 1:53:22 just six months after learning how to run."

Running was something that meant something to Willis since the age of 10, and now she is able to use her story



**After having a leg amputated during a complication with her pregnancy, Willis has learned to run again with the help of a prosthesis.**

*(Photo Courtesy of Liz Willis)*



**Willis runs in practice. Willis is training to compete in the 2016 Paralympics.**

*(Photo Courtesy of Liz Willis)*

to mentor kids who need a role model and inspiration in their lives.

“Running provides a time to meditate and focus on improving goals in my life,” Willis said. “I like the challenge it provides. More importantly, it

Paralympics.

“Once I realized that I had the talent to actually go to the Paralympics, it quickly became a dream which turned into a reality,” Willis said. “I ran the 100m, 200m, and I got 6th in the 400m.”

**ONCE I REALIZED THAT I HAD THE TALENT TO ACTUALLY GO TO THE PARALYMPICS, IT QUICKLY BECAME A DREAM WHICH TURNED INTO A REALITY,” WILLIS SAID. “I RAN THE 100M, 200M, AND I GOT 6TH IN THE 400M.**

isn't the running aspect that I enjoy the most, the opportunities it provides for me to coach young athletes who also have physical disabilities.

Running has opened doors for me to share my story worldwide and gain cultural experiences which never would have been discovered if competitions didn't lead me to those locations.”

Just one of the doors that has opened for Willis through running was the 2016

There are so many people who helped get Willis where she is today. She credits her “village” in her success.

“My husband who was often left as a single parent while I traveled to the Olympic Training Center for weeks at a time in Chula Vista, California. My son, who sacrificed a lot of mommy time the years of 2015-2016.- My coaches TJ Harris and Roy Birch, Cathy Sellers and Jaqueam Cruz who are the head coaches for

the Paralympic Team.- My nutritionist, Liz Broad, my chiropractor, Allyson Smith, Dan Whisler.- My high school coach whom I often called to bounce my ideas off of.- Scott Sabolich Prosthetics, for building my legs.- Nike and Dick's Sporting Goods who gave me contracts.- My teammates and competitors who taught me so much about prosthetics and provided competition.

As you can see it take a village to get an athlete to the Paralympics.”

After running in the paralympics in Rio De Janeiro, Willis decided to take some down time from running, and to take on a new role.

“I made the decision to slow down and we ended up expanding our family through foster care,” Willis said.

“In April 2017, we gained a daughter at just 4 days old. She is still in the foster care program, but are hoping the adoption will be completed within the next three months.

Because of this change, I have made the decision to retire from running and focus on my family life.

Today, I am a personal trainer, coaching a track team for children with physical disabilities in the Wichita area called, “Team Lightning,” changing many diapers and driving my son to his sporting events.”

At the end of the day, helping people is Willis' main priority. She hopes to make a difference in other's lives, by sharing her obstacles and triumphs.

“Through my experiences I have become much more open to those who have different cultural backgrounds than myself,” Willis said.

“I am understanding of circumstances and much slower to make judgments. I have been humbled and very grateful for the experiences bestowed on my life.

My life has also been dedicated to foundations and helping children who could possibly be Paralympians in the future.

This has become my new passion and I am excited to see how they grow in the future.”

