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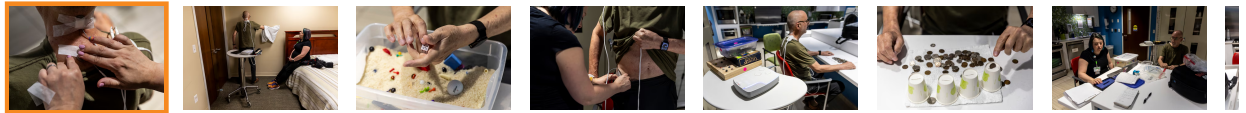
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Paralyzed walking his dog, Michigan man helps transform care for spinal cord patients

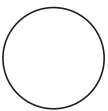
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Mount Pleasant resident John Tellis, 72, helped fund the purchase of the FDA-cleared device, giving West Michigan patients access to a new therapy designed to improve hand strength and sensation after spinal cord injury.



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Paralyzed walking his dog, Michigan man helps transform care for spinal cord patients

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By [Isaac Ritchey](#) | iritchey@mlive.com

GRAND RAPIDS, MI— When John Tellis fell while walking his dog last year, he heard a loud snap and instantly lost the ability to move.

“I was totally paralyzed from the neck down,” said Tellis, 72, of Mount Pleasant. “It was probably the worst and scariest moment of my life.”

Tellis relearned how to walk and is now living at home with his wife, Donna, as he continues his recovery from the devastating spinal cord injury.

Drawing from his own experience, he supported others facing similar challenges by helping bring a cutting-edge rehabilitation device to Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids.

Tellis contributed part of the funding to purchase a system cleared by Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The [ARC-EX system](#) is described as a non-invasive stimulation technology designed to improve hand strength, coordination and sensation in people with spinal cord injuries.



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Mount Pleasant resident John Tellis, 72, uses the ARC-EX during a therapy session with occupational therapist Katie O'Brien at Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids, Mich. on Wednesday, June 17, 2026. Tellis, who sustained a spinal cord injury in an accident while walking his dog, helped fund the purchase of the groundbreaking technology, allowing both himself and other patients with spinal cord injuries to benefit from the device. Isaac Ritchey | iritchey@mlive.c

Rather than purchasing a home device solely for his own use, Tellis chose to help make the device available so more patients could benefit.



“One thing about this injury is it made me very empathetic to other people who have loss of function,” Tellis said. “It’s life changing. People need to have access to this, and I want to help as many people as I can.”

The injury occurred during what should have been an ordinary walk with his dog.

As Tellis tried to free the dog from a fence post after it became tangled on its leash, he slipped and fell backward into a ditch.

“Fear of being a quadriplegic forevermore, being basically bedridden, was just petrifying,” he recalled. “The idea of that was like, ‘Oh my God, this can’t be happening.’”



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After being airlifted to Corewell Health Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, Tellis underwent surgery. Soon afterward, he was transferred directly to Mary Free Bed for intensive inpatient rehabilitation.

Therapists immediately began working with him.

“When I first got here, I couldn’t scratch my nose,” Tellis said. “I couldn’t move my arms. I couldn’t do a thing.”

Months of rehabilitation gradually restored much of his independence. Today, he can care for himself, walk and perform many daily activities, though he continues working to restore hobbies such as woodworking and playing the hammer dulcimer.



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Tellis first learned about the ARC-EX system during his rehabilitation journey. He was intrigued by research showing its potential to improve hand function and sensation following spinal cord injury.

“It was certainly addressing what I was most concerned about — getting the use of my hands and getting (the) feeling back,” he said.

Officials say the device, which is grounded to the patient’s hips or collarbones, uses transcutaneous stimulation — electrical signals through the skin to the spinal cord — while patients perform targeted therapy exercises.



Occupational therapist Katie O'Brien, who works with patients using the device at Mary Free Bed, said the technology helps prepare the nervous system for movement and recovery.

"The goal is that we're stimulating the nerves in the spinal cord to make them more excitable," O'Brien explained. "When we make them more excitable, it reduces the amount of energy required to make the movement. Over time, it helps them regain sensation."

The device is currently approved to help improve upper-extremity strength, coordination and sensation.

Tellis said the benefits were noticeable from his very first treatment.

"I saw immediate impact," he said. "I had more dexterity. I had more fluidity in my movements. I could actually begin to have some sensation in what was otherwise totally numb hands."



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Before his injury, simple tasks like holding an object required no thought. Now, diminished sensation often makes it difficult to know whether he is gripping something securely.

Without treatment, he describes his hands as feeling perpetually numb, “like they’re full of Novocain.”

“With the machine, I actually have sensation,” he said. “I can tell if something has texture. I can feel edges that I couldn’t otherwise.”

O'Brien has witnessed similar changes.

“The biggest thing is that he’s having improved sensation in his hands,” she said. “He’s also experiencing improved coordination and overall improved strength.”

During therapy sessions, Tellis practices detailed hand movements, object manipulation and sensory activities designed to take advantage of the nervous system’s increased responsiveness while the device is active.

The effects can last up to 48 hours after therapy before slowly fading, Tellis said.

“The stimulation itself isn’t what’s making a difference,” O'Brien said. “The stimulation paired with exercise and activity is what makes a difference.”



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Mary Free Bed has had the ARC-EX device for only a few weeks, but O'Brien said about eight patients have used the device so far, with many more identified as potential candidates.

For Tellis, helping bring the technology to Grand Rapids may prove as meaningful as the gains he experiences himself.

"I wanted to do something that others could use," he said.

O'Brien said that generosity reflects the character of the retired law enforcement officer.

"I think it's so incredibly special and speaks a lot to John and the kind of person he is," she said. "Anybody can be in this position at any time. To have that mindset that if I have something I can give to help other people, I'm going to do that—I think it's just great."



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While researchers continue studying the long-term benefits of spinal cord stimulation, Tellis remains hopeful the technology will help create lasting improvements for patients recovering from spinal cord injuries.

“My hope is that the neural pathways are reestablished and that you get permanent benefit from the machine,” he said. “There are thousands of people who could benefit from this type of therapy. It’s just monumental.”

For a man who once lay in a ditch unable to move, every step forward matters, he said. His generosity is now helping countless others take steps of their own.



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Isaac Ritchey

Isaac Ritchey, 26, is a multimedia specialist for MLive, serving communities of West Michigan while based in Grand Rapids. He graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in journalism in May 2021.....more

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