

## Danny Scott

*A.A. in Liberal Studies – Excelsior College – 2001*

*B.A. in Liberal Studies – Excelsior College -- 2002*

There's one photograph that Danny Scott's dad was really proud of: It shows him standing in the ring beside Muhammad Ali, missing four teeth and sporting his signature Afro-Mohawk hairdo. Burnell Scott was his given name, but he fought for 22 years as a professional under the name "Kid Lightning." Of all Ali's various sparring partners, Kid Lightning was fast enough to be his speed trainer. The day that photo was snapped, Kid had hurt Ali, and Ali paid him back in the next round by knocking out four of his teeth. Then he hung his arm around Kid's neck for the picture and handed Kid his lifelong claim to fame. His son, Danny, didn't see that photo until he grew up.

Kid Lightning took off when Danny was a baby, and Danny was raised by his mom in Melbourne, Florida. He had the genetic makeup, drive, and coordination to excel as an athlete – he was an Amateur Athletic Union boxer at the Palm Bay recreational center between ages 12 and 16, and was chosen later for the All-Navy football team – but he also earned a 3.98 GPA in high school and was a National Honor Graduate. And Danny knew enough to stop boxing early; he didn't want to mess up his faculties for what he hoped would be a career in medicine.

When he turned 17, Danny enlisted in the Navy, and a roller coaster career followed. He went through boot camp, then trained to be a hospital corpsman at the Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia. Six months into his training, he revived a comatose sailor and was one of the youngest ever to be awarded the Navy Achievement Medal. A promotion to E3 followed, and an admiral chose Danny to be his personal driver for the next four years.

At age 22, in 1988, Danny was sent to Field Medical Service School at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, California, to study medicine. He graduated with honors and was sent to Okinawa, Japan, where he won another Navy Achievement Medal and was promoted again. Then the first Gulf War broke out -- Desert Shield, Desert Storm -- and Danny operated there with thirteen different units as a medic. When he returned to the States to attend the Navy School of Health Sciences in November of 1991, he thought he was okay. He hadn't been shot, he had learned a lot in the field, and he graduated as an Independent Duty Corpsman (IDC) in two years. He was set. IDCs could do everything, including emergency dentistry, water testing, minor surgery, high altitude medicine, pest control for inspections, all their own labs, you name it. IDCs did the whole nine, from curing humans to killing bugs.

With his new knowledge and abilities, Danny was sent back to Okinawa, but this time as Clinic Director of the Joint Forces Brig Clinic on the island. He was responsible for the medical care of 181 active personnel, as well as 217 sailors and soldiers incarcerated in the military brig there. It was Danny's first duty station, and he loved it. He was healthy, running 16 miles a day, and happy in his work and his life: he had married a bright young woman named Shelia a few months before he was transferred back to Okinawa.

Then the unthinkable happened: Danny went home after work one day and took a nap; when he woke up, he couldn't walk. They rushed Danny to the emergency room for an MRI, found extensive nerve damage in his back, but couldn't tell why. Danny was sent home in a wheelchair, despondent. He had to catheterize himself every day to keep from growing septic, and when the doctors stopped his pain meds, he crashed. He was paralyzed from the waist down, and they said he'd probably never walk again.

After that, the Navy sent Danny to their hospitals in Hawaii, Portsmouth, and Bethesda, but couldn't obtain a diagnosis. Finally, President Clinton's doctors heard about his case and offered to take it on. They

performed a multiple-level laminectomy, halving five vertebrae, and removed a fibrous granuloma that was impinging on Danny's spine and causing the paralysis. The operation was a success, but Danny still couldn't walk.

"Cut your losses," he told Shelia. "We've only been married a year. You're 24. You're beautiful. Divorce me and start over. You don't need to get stuck taking care of an invalid." Shelia's answer was simple: "No. I didn't marry you for money or good times. I married you for love. I'm not leaving."

When they returned to Portsmouth, Danny's first roommate in the Navy, now a physical therapist, met him at the airport and promised him, "You're going to walk again." Within a few months, Danny was up on crutches; after another year, he was walking. "I can't run," he admits. "I can't hop. But I'm walking."

In 1998, Danny retired from the Navy with 100% disability from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and was the third person to get the Gulf War syndrome classification. No one was admitting that the anti-nerve agent pills he was issued in the Gulf War, or the anthrax shots to immunize him against chemical warfare, caused the "mass of unknown etiology" in his back. Shelia Scott wasn't about to let him become a "hobo," as Danny calls it, just hanging around all the time. "Hey, you've got to go back to school," she told him. "You've got so much to offer."

Danny wanted to attend medical school, but the VA would only pay him to attend Pensacola Junior College's nursing program -- until his last semester, when they yanked him out and switched him to Troy State University's satellite campus in Pensacola to major in Administration. That was it for Danny: He had a lot of credits built up, and a counselor at Troy State told him he had enough to get an Associate's degree from Excelsior. He received that in 2001, and then earned his B.A. the following year. Shelia received a B.A. from Excelsior at the same time, and at the 2002 Commencement, they walked across the stage together, hand-in-hand, to accept their diplomas.

“I love Excelsior, wholeheartedly,” Danny says. “I know I’ve referred more than 200 individuals there, and I know for a fact at least 60 have gotten degrees. Whenever I called Excelsior, there was always someone there, willing to help you, and they were sincere. It almost seemed like they did it not for a paycheck, but like me, because you have to give back. I was a mentor at the Pensacola Boys Base, for kids who got in trouble with the law, and I was the coordinator for the Special Olympics in Santa Rosa County for two years. You have to help people. You give what you can of your time, your wisdom, whatever. And that’s what it felt like with Excelsior, like they really cared.”