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COVER STORY

Columbine victim thriving as exec

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Financial representative Patrick Ireland knows firsthand how quickly things can go wrong.

He was 17 when two mass murderers shot him twice in the head and once in the foot in the Columbine High School library on April 20, 1999.

Partly paralyzed and drifting in and out of consciousness, Ireland dragged himself to the library's second-floor window and fell out, into the arms of Lakewood SWAT team members standing on top of an armored car. Televised images of "the boy in the window" were seen around the world, and Ireland instantly became a symbol of survival.

He has not only survived, but thrived. Ten years later, Ireland is a newly appointed managing director with the Denver office of Northwestern Mutual, a Milwaukee-based mutual company, which through the company and its subsidiaries provides insurance, investment, retirement and estate planning services.

He will head a new office scheduled to open on Aug. 17 at 350 Interlocken Blvd. in Broomfield. It's Northwestern Mutual-Denver's fourth satellite office in Colorado; the main office, where Ireland has worked since 2004, is in south Denver.

Against a backdrop of recession and market turmoil, Northwestern Mutual-Denver enjoyed 30 percent new-client growth in the past year, Ireland said.

"People in general are just looking to have some additional layer of security, whether it's through retirement planning or investing or insurance," he said.

Standing amid bare white walls, exposed wires and blueprints, Ireland showed a reporter the 3,600-square-foot space where 11 financial representatives, three support staff, and three or four interns soon will be working. He said he was planning to hire

even more people.

"This is a time when the do-it-yourselfers are realizing that they need somebody to help them maneuver through the financial maze that's out there," said Scott Theodore, managing partner in Northwestern Mutual's Denver office.

Ireland and his team had promoted the idea of establishing a northern presence to take advantage of population growth in Broomfield and Boulder, Theodore said.

"We thought it made a lot of sense," he said.

Ireland has accomplished a lot in the 10 years since the Columbine shootings. Gravely injured, he spent months at Craig Hospital regaining the use of his legs and relearning how to talk and read. But he returned to Columbine in fall 1999 and graduated as co-valedictorian of his class in 2000.

He studied finance at Colorado State University, from which he graduated magna cum laude in 2004. An internship with Northwestern Mutual during his senior year introduced him to the financial services industry.

"I had a wonderful experience that year as a college financial representative, not only with the individuals that I had the chance to meet with as clients, but also the people within the office," he said.

After graduation, he considered a variety of banking and finance jobs, including some in Los Angeles and Seattle. But nothing appealed to him as much as the work he'd done at Northwestern Mutual.



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Patrick Ireland is managing director of the new Northwestern Mutual branch in Broomfield. Ireland shows the new office currently under construction.

He started working full time in the company's Denver office in September 2004.

He also married his college sweetheart, Kacie; they celebrated their fourth anniversary this month.

In some ways, his terrible experience at Columbine helps him guide clients now, he said.

"It didn't necessarily point me toward Northwestern, but it gave me a different point of view," Ireland said. "One thing we know is that life is uncertain. You can't control the things that are uncertain, but we can control what our responses are and what we do from that point forward.

"We can't control our future, but if we can shift some of the risks and uncertainties to a company with 150-plus years of experience, it's one of the areas where we have an opportunity to impact people's lives."

He still shows some physical effects of his injuries, including a brace on one leg and some weakness on his right side. But aside from a few media interviews last April, the 10th anniversary of the shootings, Ireland doesn't talk about Columbine much these days.

IRELAND: Columbine survivor heads NW Mutual office



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Patrick Ireland, managing director of the new Northwestern Mutual branch in Broomfield, was gravely injured in the Columbine school shootings 10 years ago.

Occasionally it will come up during a conversation with a client, he said.

“Not everybody notices, and it’s not really something I bring up in conversation,” he said. “But if I feel comfortable, and I feel that it would add to our conversation or to strengthening our relationship, I’m not opposed to sharing my story.”

In the past year or so, he has spoken about Columbine to a few groups. The positive response made him think there might be a point to telling his story to a wider audience — not as a tale of tragedy, but of hope and recovery.

He recently finished writing a book, tentatively titled “A Window in Time,” with

Terry Frei, a sportswriter for The Denver Post and ESPN.com, whom he met through a client. They’re looking for a publisher.

Unlike other Columbine books that focus on the killers, his manuscript is “more of a positive tale of overcoming and triumph, and some of the good things that can come from ... an experience like that,” Ireland said.