

## Willson seeks a worthwhile use for fame

By Kristin Huckshorn  
Mercury News Staff Writer

On the weekend after Thanksgiving, a teen-ager sticks his head inside a sunny front room and interrupts his father to ask if he wants a turkey sandwich or a piece of leftover pumpkin pie.

The scene is not remarkable.

The people are.

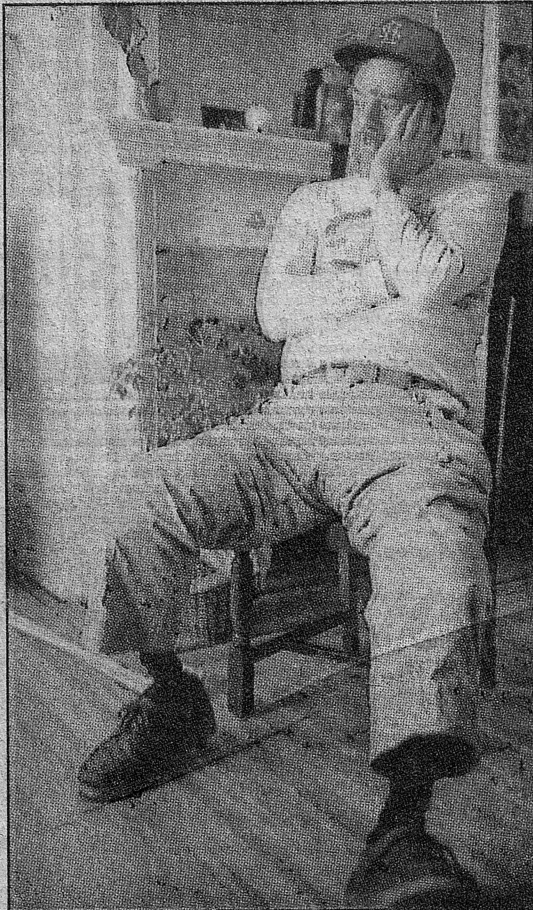
The teen-ager is 14-year-old Gabriel Rau. The man in the hard-back chair and St. Louis Cardinals cap is his stepfather, Brian Willson.

"Sometimes," Willson says later, nodding affectionately toward a closing door, "Gabriel tests my non-violent philosophy more than anyone else."

You know Willson's story by now: how a 40-year-old, newly married attorney and Vietnam veteran sat down on a railroad track three months ago and was run over by a train.

You know that he thought the

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Tom Van Dyke — Mercury News

**Brian Willson ponders future**

# Peace activist seeks to use his sacrifice wisely

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Navy munitions train would stop. That the train crew thought he would get off the track.

That he inexplicably lived. But that he lost both legs below the knee, thereby winning an international forum at a high price.

Now, the first wave of attention has died and S. Brian Willson, activist, husband, stepfather, is preparing for his new life as a public figure and double amputee.

"I am spending a lot of time thinking about what direction my life should take," Willson said last week, seated inside the modest San Francisco town house that he is sharing with his wife, Holley Rauen, and Gabriel. "I spend a lot of time asking, 'Why me? Why was I run over? Why did I live?'"

Opinion varies about who was to blame for the incident Sept. 1 at the Concord Naval Weapons Station. There is a consensus, however, that Willson's physical and mental recovery has been extraordinary.

Already, he has discarded crutches and is walking with support from two thin canes. Willson is proud of his progress and readily rolls up a pant leg to show how the prostheses are attached to his thighs.

"The doctors say that I am way ahead of schedule," he said.

Under the brim of his Cardinals cap — the same one he was wearing Sept. 1 — is a golf-ball sized indentation on the right side of his forehead where his skull caved in.

No other scars are visible. And if Willson is scarred internally, he hides it well.

"I haven't had a depression yet," said Willson, who has remained upbeat since the day after the incident. "Maybe I will down the road, but it hasn't happened so far."

Only physical exhaustion has slowed him down. Willson recently returned from a week in Washington, D.C., where he attended a House subcommittee hearing on a Navy report of the incident and made almost round-the-clock public appearances.

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— Brian Willson

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Consequently, a scheduled trip to El Salvador this week had to be canceled because he was worn out.

"I barely got out of bed on Thanksgiving," Willson said, noting, "I have tended to do too much because I don't know how to slow down yet."

Despite that pace, thousands of letters to Willson from around the world remain unopened. Requests for interviews and appearances have continued to stack up.

Holley Rauen is quitting her job as a midwife to work with him full time. And that's for starters.

Before the incident, Willson's quest to end U.S. arms shipments to Central America had drawn sporadic attention.

"By taking my legs, they have given me an international standing," he said.

Willson still is deciding how best to use that standing. A reflective and committed man, he feels a responsibility to use it wisely.

Agents are talking to Willson about both a book and a movie, "although that's all talk until it actually happens," he said.

He expects his attorneys to file a civil suit against the Navy within a month.

"If nothing else, the examination and cross-examination is important to get some more questions answered," he said.

He intends to continue acts of non-violent dissent and is thinking seriously about widening his focus beyond Central America. Willson would like to push internationally for both peace and the right to dissent non-violently, whatever the risk.

"You have to be willing to take risks for what you believe in," he said. "Otherwise, how strongly do you believe?"

Since the incident, numerous groups have asked Willson to champion their causes. But he is concerned about being turned into a protest movement side-show.

"I worry that some people are exploiting me," said Willson, although he said he thinks it mostly is unintentional.

Too, Willson is concerned about spending enough time with Rauen and Gabriel. He said the incident has drawn them closer.

Neither Willson nor Rauen is particularly religious, but he said the experience of the last three months has deepened their spiritual beliefs.

"You wonder why a lot," he said. "You wonder how you can be of the most use for the rest of your life."

And before you wonder aloud what Willson is thankful for, he'll set you straight.

"I am thankful to be alive."