

# Still asking the question ‘why?’

Family man battles back from serious burns

by Nevin diJulio



Nevin on his first day in the Halifax burn unit

## Hind sight: a wonderful thing if you could act on it.

The ability to change a decision that was made and have the outcome change as well. This was one of the thoughts I dwelled on over a four-month stay in the hospital – three months in the Burn unit, two weeks in the ICU and three weeks in rehab.

In June of 2011, I was working as a processing operator for a company called Cavendish Farms which produces frozen French fries for grocery stores and large franchise restaurants such as Wendy’s, Burger King and KFC. They employ roughly 750 people, running 24/7, with four crews on 12-hour rotating shifts. I had been working there for just shy of four years.

I started as a general cleaner and progressed to working in the warehouse and operating the machines used to peel the potatoes. I also became a member of the First Responders Unit. I was familiar with the safety procedures and I followed them to the letter, almost to the point that I annoyed some of my co-workers.

At the time of the incident I was training as a fryer operator. I had been training

for about three months. Getting qualified on the fryer meant a raise in pay. Just trying to provide for my family.

I’m married. I have four kids and a grandson – a very busy family life. Between organized sports, school events and other interests we had little time to breathe. We spent a lot of time together. We were very close and we put family first. That family bond would come in handy over the next four years.

On June 21, 2011 I was scheduled to work the night shift from 7 p.m. June 20th to 7 a.m. June 21st. Initially I had put in for vacation time that night as it was my birthday. However there was an oil change-over planned, and as a trainee, I figured it was in my best interest to cancel my vacation and perform the changeover.

It was an uneventful evening. At around midnight we were told that the changeover would take place at 2 AM, once the product in the system had cleared the fryer.

The first part of the process was to turn off the heating element for the fryers. Current temperature was 380 degrees F. The second part was to open the valves to allow the oil to be pumped to holding tanks. The fryer has two stages, each about 10 feet wide and 15 long and there would be about five inches of oil in each stage. To change the oil, the operator had to stand

under one of the filters and turn the valves manually. I had opened two valves and was opening the third one, while narrating what I was doing so my trainer could verify that I was following the process for the proper reason, when hot oil met water that wasn’t supposed to be in the system.

When hot oil and water meet, the oil tries to get out of the way as fast and violently as possible. Remember the filter I mentioned earlier? Well that’s where the oil went. The filter is a box, about four feet long, 2 ½ feet wide with folding double doors on either side. The first stage of the fryer emptied itself over my head. Simply put, I took a shower.

I was kind of lucky. My trainer saw what was happening and warned me. I was able to cover up to sort of protect myself. I hugged myself and dropped my head between my shoulders. I also had to move because the shower was still in progress. I had to move backwards, then to my left, forward and then to my left again before I was out of the oil.

I was in the walkway at the beginning of the first stage of the fryer when I fell to the floor. That’s when I screamed. Four times at the top of my lungs. I could be heard in other parts of the plant. The following was running through my mind: Why me? Images of my wife and kids. Who would take care of them? Grandson, mother, brothers, sisters. What was going to happen to me? Happy Birthday!!!! I was 45; would I make 46?

While this was going on, there was a safety meeting happening in the office about 40 feet away. Lucky for me it was being attended by four of the first responders working that evening. They attempted to pick me up but I told them not to touch me. I got up and walked to the flushing shower which was already running. The first responders asked me questions while they directed me under the water and started to cut off my clothes so they wouldn’t get embedded in my skin.

So began an experience that changed me, challenged me, humbled me, shook my faith and opened my eyes; opened them to the fact that life had been very good to me and my family. I went from being the guy that helped everyone to needing everyone’s help.

So, from 2 a.m. to roughly 9 a.m. on the morning of my birthday the following happened:

- I was going to start the process of pumping the oil to the holding tanks and then go to break
- I received burns from 380-degree oil to roughly 45 per cent of my body (back, arms, legs, ears and face)
- 20-minute cold shower, naked with most of my co-workers watching while waiting for the EMTs to arrive
- 15 minute trip to local hospital where they started meds, IV, blood tests, catheter and prep'd me for transit by air, to the Burn Unit in Halifax, NS (about 300 km away)
- 10-minute drive to local air strip because the evac helicopter was down for repairs and I was transported in a small plane – so small that no one in my family could accompany me on the trip
- arrived at the hospital around 9 a.m., being told that my family was on their way.

Over the next four months I went through surgeries for skin grafts, bowel obstruction, appendectomy, and placement of ostomy. I battled infections including MRSA and coped with X-rays, CAT scans, MRIs and a range of medications and antibiotics. At different times I was hooked up to PIC lines to drain infections, CT lines for medication, breathing and feeding tubes, along with IVs.

I went home on October 19, 2011. I had just started walking on my own again at the beginning of the month. I still had the ostomy in place. I was taking 10 different medications. Weak, tired and scared. Not done yet. Once home my routine included twice-daily bandage changes, changing the ostomy, physio, occupational therapy, compression garments, referrals with surgeons, psychologist appointments, and further infections.

As life altering and devastating as the physical injuries are they are more easily attended to than the emotional effect an experience like this has on a person. Cuts and burns heal. Infections are treated. Broken bones mend. These are injuries that have standardized procedures for treatment.

Emotional wounds take a more customized treatment plan. This is where the support of health care professionals, families and friends is so important. I know for

a fact that if it hadn't been for my wife, children, mother and my extended family, which includes my friends, I would not be here today.

Sadly, they can only help if you let them. They have to understand that they don't know what you're feeling. Hell, a lot of the time you don't know what you're feeling. And it takes longer than you think it will. Much longer.

To look at me, you wouldn't know that anything had happened until you see the scars. You can't see the emotional scars. So it's hard to judge how effective the therapy has been or how far along the healing process an individual is.

I used to believe it couldn't happen to me. And if it did, it would be a minor setback and I would be right as rain quickly. As you just read, not so much.

It can happen. It does happen. Even when all the safety procedures are followed and the proper PPE is worn it happens. I was following the established procedures under the guide of a qualified operator while I was in training – procedures that had been followed for 15-plus years. The company later changed these procedures.

I tried to return to my employer. I went back to work for six months, in a different position, and then realized that being in an industrial environment was having a very negative effect on me. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to work in an industrial setting.

My perspective on many things has changed.

I know things could have been much

worse. But I tried to find a positive aspect to focus on. The fact that I was still training meant that I had someone with me and they were able to warn me. I look at who may have been working there instead of me and as arrogant as it sounds, I'm not sure if any of them would have come through this as well as I have.

It's been a difficult four years. Many times I have questioned whether it was worth it to go through the pain of all the procedures, of the constant memories, the flash backs and the uncertainty of whether I would get back to the person I was before the incident. I feel like I've lost 10 years. I didn't expect to feel the way I do until after I retired. I also feel like I've lost some mental capacity.

Then I think of the day I was present at my first family forum. At dinner that first night there is a ceremony of remembrance, where the family members of individuals affected by workplace injuries, occupational illness and fatalities honour the memory of their loved ones and the event that changed their lives forever. During that ceremony I realized that my family wasn't on its own. I wasn't on my own. Other people were feeling the things we were feeling, they were going through similar situations and dealing with the same situations we were.

The person I was before the incident is gone. What I have been through has had such a profound effect on me that, still, to this day, I ask the question why.



Nevin at right, with his family