

AN EARLY END TO YOUTH AND DREAMS

by David Collins

Injured young worker copes with chronic pain and achieve new goals



David today, with his partner Nick MacVane.

Superstitions: “The belief in supernatural causality—that one event causes another without any natural process linking the two events together”. Many people have asked me if I’ve become superstitious since my accident happened on Friday the 13th. In fact, there have been 24 “Friday the 13ths” since the night that changed my life and to me it’s just another day of the week.

Friday, June 13, 2003 was my last day of grade ten and all I had left to do was write my final exams the following week. Summer vacation was finally here! My 17th birthday was less than a month away and I had a job lined up to make some spending money for the summer. My biggest dilemma that day was deciding if I should go to work or if I should hang out with friends and celebrate the end of the school year. Even at 16 though, I was responsible. I chose to go to work so I could make a little bit of money.

This was my second season working at a

four-star resort near my home in Georgetown, Prince Edward Island. I worked in the kitchen as a dishwasher. I didn’t love my job – it was dirty, hectic, and physically demanding – but I had dreams of becoming a chef and attending the Culinary School of Canada, in Charlottetown.

That evening I was working with a friend and co-worker, Matt, who was also 16. It was a slow night in the kitchen and we began wrapping up our shift around 11:00 p.m. The kitchen staff had already left for the night and we were the only ones left. One of our last duties was to take the garbage to the dumpsters at the other end of the property, using the staff “golf cart” – a powerful, heavy-duty version. Neither of us had drivers’ licenses, but management didn’t pay attention to who had access to the keys and it was common to see the young dishwashers using the golf carts.

The weekend prior we had gone for a little joy ride and this was our intent again. With

Matt behind the wheel, we took the cart for a drive before heading to the dumpsters. On the way back to clock out, Matt began driving the cart in tight, fast circles. We hit a large rock, nearly tipping the cart. I fell to the ground and before he could stop, Matt circled around again and accidentally hit my back with the cart.

I rolled around in front of the golf cart. I remember laughing at first, thinking I was fine. Moments later when I attempted to get up, I realized something wasn’t right. I couldn’t move my legs. I realized this was serious.

Matt and I were both terrified. He didn’t want to leave me there, and I didn’t want to be left alone. He attempted to lift me into the cart, but despite his best efforts, he couldn’t do it and he had to leave me behind while he went for help.

As I lay on the ground in the dark, I looked up at the stars. I began to think about being in a wheelchair. I broke down and started to cry. I was now scared when I thought about my future.

Matt finally came back with a supervisor and said the ambulance was on its way. The supervisor rushed over to me and told me to lie down and remain completely still. He put his hands beneath my head to prevent me from moving around, but the damage had already been done. My brother, who was working that evening in another kitchen at the resort, said he had called our parents and they were on their way.

It seemed to take the ambulance forever. My visibly-upset parents arrived shortly after the ambulance and all I could say to them was that I was sorry. The paramedics got me onto the backboard and rushed me to the nearest hospital. The doctors and nurses there didn’t let on the severity of my injury but indicated that I had indeed broken my back and that I needed to go to Charlottetown to see an orthopedic surgeon.

At 7:00 a.m. on June 14 I was transported to the hospital in Charlottetown where the orthopedic surgeon assessed me. He wasted no time in determining that I needed care that Charlottetown could not provide. He confirmed that I had broken my back and that there was significant spinal cord damage. I kept asking, “Will I be able to walk again?”, but the doctor could only tell me that it was still too early to know.

By 9:00 a.m. I was in an ambulance on my way to the QEII Health Science Centre in Halifax, a four-hour drive, where a neurosurgeon was waiting for me. I drifted in and out of consciousness from the medications, but my mother said it was the longest trip of her life. Everything happened so quickly that she didn't even have time to go home and pack a bag.

When I arrived at the QEII, tests began immediately, including x-rays, CT scans, and MRIs. Intense swelling around the injury site made it hard to get clear imaging and would also delay any operations. The pain was unbearable, very hard to control, and was like nothing I'd experienced before.

“ Despite all of this, I try not to let my pain disrupt my life. I still have a passion for cooking for friends and family. I enjoy taking road trips – I feel free and unrestricted when I'm driving.

The doctors told me that I probably would not walk again. I had a burst L1 fracture with spinal cord and nerve damage. In other words, when the bone broke it exploded and bone fragments went everywhere. Furthermore, they said when Matt tried to lift me it most likely caused more damage than the original injury. They indicated that once the swelling had decreased they would be able to operate and fully know the damage.

On June 17 I went under the knife for the first time. I was scared but I just wanted to get it over with as I was in so much pain and hoped that surgery might help. The eight-hour surgery consisted of the removal of bone fragments from my spinal cord and nerves, a bone graft from my hip for the spinal fusion of T12 to L2, and four titanium rods to help support my back.

Shortly after the first surgery I began to regain some movement and feeling in my lower half. The doctor was realistic and told me that although I was slowly gaining feeling, I still may not be able to walk. He explained many paraplegics in wheel chairs have some strength, but not enough to be able to walk.

While I tried to stay positive, many days I wanted to give up on everything. However, my family, friends and the nurses wouldn't allow that. They kept me motivated to stay positive and keep going. I began physiotherapy in my bed – mostly stretching my limbs and exercising my arms because I had even lost the strength to feed myself.

When the swelling went down enough that they could remove the remaining bone

fragments, I had my second surgery. The surgeons also tightened the rods that had become loose with the reduction of swelling. After the second surgery, movement and strength in my lower half continued to increase, but not yet enough to stand, let alone walk.

I spent my 17th birthday at the QEII. Mom bought me an ice cream cake in an attempt to lift my spirits. That night a couple of the nurses surprised me with balloons and a frosted cupcake with a lit candle. It was also a celebration because I was leaving the QEII the following day.

Only July 11th, I returned to PEI to continue my journey in the rehabilitation unit.

While I would now be able to see my family and friends more often, I still suffered from major depression as I struggled to accept that I was a paraplegic in a wheel chair.

In August I finally had enough strength to stand up and take my first step. It was only one step, but it was a start. It took every bit of energy I had and I remembered feeling exhausted but a sense of achievement came over me. I had been told I would likely never walk yet now I'd taken my first step! From there it slowly got easier day by day, but I still had a long road ahead of me.

On October 17th I was finally ready to go home. I was walking with a walker and continued physiotherapy four days a week. I slowly got stronger and remained determined, and by April 2004 I was walking without any assistance!

The injury taught me how to set goals and how to achieve them. Finishing high school was challenging due to my limitations and my fear of being trampled in the hallway when the bell rang, but the school was very accommodating. I graduated only one semester behind – this was a great achievement, but what was next?

Before my accident, I wanted to become a chef but that was not ideal anymore. I cannot lift heavy objects or stand for long periods, and my balance is horrendous. One of my high school teachers asked if I had ever thought about taking a business program. She pointed out my high grades in her business class and

thought I would be well suited. I've always had an interest in business, marketing and technology, so I thought, "Why not?!"

Today, I'm a Channel and Product Marketing Coordinator with Invesco Canada, a global investment management company. I started as a UPEI co-op student in the summer of 2008 and have worked my way through a few different positions. Invesco has been very accommodating, and I'm very thankful for this.

I suffer from chronic pain due to scar tissue left on the nerves in my back after the bone exploded. I have to be very mindful of how I'm sitting, standing, or lying, because if the nerves are agitated then the pain sets in and I'm completely out of commission for hours. My pain is a little different than most – it's all or nothing. Right now as I'm writing this I have a pain level of zero, but when my back is "triggered" the pain slowly escalates to the point where I'm lying in bed unable to move, and I've literally urinated in bed because I was unable to get up to use the washroom.

Despite all of this, I try not to let my pain disrupt my life. I still have a passion for cooking for friends and family. I enjoy taking road trips – I feel free and unrestricted when I'm driving.

Friday June 13, 2003 will always be the day that changed my life. I had to learn to walk again, I matured at an earlier age, and I had to learn to set and achieve goals for myself. Of course, I wish that the accident had never happened and I often wonder where I would be today if it hadn't. I've learned to accept things I cannot change and make the most of life.



David taking his first step with physiotherapist.