

Reflections: five years in a chair

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When Charlie Warriner broke his back five years ago he remembers lying in his hospital bed and telling his girlfriend, "don't worry, I'm going to walk out of here."

With his spinal cord severed there wasn't much chance of that, but behind that optimism lay one of Warriner's best qualities, his quiet determination.

A hockey player since he was six, Warriner broke his neck as a result of an accident a month before turning 21. He was playing with some friends at a local arena in his home town of Markham when it happened; he was skating towards the corner to get the puck when his skates became stuck in the ice, sending him crashing headfirst into the boards. The impact left him a quadriplegic. He has the use of his arms but not his fingers.

When you first meet Warriner what strikes you is his easygoing, friendly manner, a quality he has kept in spite of having had to drastically alter his life. When the accident happened, he was apprenticing to be an auto mechanic at a local gas station.

He needed only another six months at college to get his licence. Limited to a wheelchair he would never work at his trade but, Warriner, who says he always finishes what he starts, was determined the disability wouldn't stop him.

After spending three months in St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto and 13 months in rehabilitation at Lindhurst, he went on to finish his apprenticeship at Centennial College in Scarborough. He is proud of his accomplishment; he is one of only a few quadriplegics to have done so. "Persevere — just because you have been dealt a bad hand, doesn't mean you don't play it out," he says.

Perseverance was what Warriner needed when he broke his neck — within a week he had contracted pneumonia and was close to death. He spent three weeks in intensive care, part of the time on a respirator. He found the time in hospital most frustrating because he couldn't make any



Photo/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Charlie Warriner broke his neck in a hockey accident five years ago in Markham, a remarkably similar incident to Kurt Gengenbach last January. Warriner continued his studies as an auto mechanic at Centennial College, after the accident. He's employed at Stouffville Co-operative and active with the CPA SCI-Link program helping others adjust to life in a wheelchair.

progress. He says he survived by drawing on his resources: his family, friends and church.

"If I sometimes became a little down, I would pray for partial miracles, to be able to move my hands and my fingers, then after that pray to be able to deal with it. If I'm not going to walk then give me the peace of mind to accept it."

The accident has caused Warriner to alter his life plans. He comes from a family where farming is in the blood. When he was 18, hoping to follow his two brothers into farming, he studied farm mechanics for one year at Kemptville College outside Ottawa. But his dream wasn't completely shattered.

"I miss farming," he says, "but I've been lucky, I've been able to stay close to it." For the past three years he's worked for the Stouffville Co-operative which deals in farm products and equipment. He works in customer relations looking after the orders and the accounts receivable. He applied for the job after he heard a girl was going on maternity leave. "She came back but they kept me on, they were happy with me."

Charlie says he finds it hard to think about the negative aspects of being disabled, he says he

look back, I wish I could have done a bit more waterskiing, a bit more camping or driven a big tractor or even a combine."

After being in hospital for a year he says he found it difficult to re-establish ties with friends. "It hurts when the people you knew before cut you off. I think they're frightened, they remember you as you used to be. Sometimes the past is hard to let go of. But once they saw me, they saw that I was still the same person, they usually came around."

Warriner knows how important participation is and spends time volunteering with individuals with recent spinal cord injuries under CPA's SCI-Link program. "There's things out there to do and to be done," he says. And he has followed his own advice and is surprisingly still active in sports. Once a week he plays rugby wheelchair at Variety Village in Scarborough.

"I want people to realize that life goes on in a wheelchair," he says. "Even though I broke my neck, I'm still happy. I still have my friends and my church."

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