

Lucky

Sometimes life for an 18 year old is pretty simple, you grow up, you play some sports, try your hand at drums, graduate high school and just when you think your life is on broad reach, wham you hit a tree while skiing! I remembered nothing at all for several weeks after January 19th, 2003, but my family and friends and a journal my parents kept have helped me piece back together those harrowing days.

If you are fortunate enough to be wearing a helmet and avoid bodily injury like I did chances are, you'll live. I lived through my life threatening brain injury with a lot of help from a lot of people.

My friend Martin, the only one to witness the accident, called to my twin brother Kyle, who was skiing just ahead, to get help right away. Emergency personnel were next to my aid and then my parents. Martin told emergency staff he thought I had hit the tree chest first, but that was not to be the case.

You see, I grew up skiing this mountain and knew every off-piste, fun seeking path there was to ski, and that is where we spent most of our 50 plus ski days each year. I also knew most Wentworth members and staff, so chances were good that one of my close friends would arrive to work on me.

Chris Lockyer is a professional ski patroller at Wentworth and a good friend, he had to deliver top notch first aid that could potentially save my life while his friend (me) lay literally wrapped motionless around a tree.

Chris' instant decisions made a crucial difference in getting me to critical care fast. Chris called for the air ambulance while preparing me for my toboggan ride to the base of the hill. Unsure of his decision to ask for air support, the 911 emergency helicopter staff reassured Chris that he had made the right decision, that they err on the side of caution and could always turn back if their service was not required.

The ski patrollers were managing to keep my mom from getting too close but my step-dad Randy was part of the first aid crew strapping me to the spine board. Later Randy told me he wanted to stay close to the toboggan as it descended the hill to make sure one of our family members was close by in case I died in transit.

Of course, I only know this now after being told these details. At this point, I was unconscious and therefore could not give any indication of the injuries I had sustained. This must have been very upsetting for the people who I was now depending to save my life.

Luck seemed to follow me after the ill-fated impact because when I reached the base of the hill, there were several doctors volunteering to help. Some still remain anonymous. One doctor I know was Dr. Johnson Ngan, an anesthesiologist from the QE2 Life

Sciences Hospital. I have spent the last several years alpine racing in the Nova Scotia Race Series with his daughter and knew him as a ski dad.

He assisted with the assessment and performed the intubation in the ski patroller's hut with the assistance of the other volunteer doctors, Randy my step dad, Wentworth's ski coach, Jamie Cooke, now a paramedic trainee (another close friend) and the myriad of emergency services staff. It was there that it was determined I had a serious brain injury.

Then I am told I was transported by air from Wentworth Valley 90 miles to the QE2 Life Sciences Hospital. There a team of trauma personnel, neurosurgeons and other related staff took me into their care. I was whisked to the cat scan machine right away, and the results from this only allowed doctors to say to my parents that I was young and there was hope.

It had been 1 hour and 40 minutes from the time the accident was called in at the top of Ski Wentworth to my arrival at the hospital . Truly luck was on my side from this point on. After 24 hours I had escaped need for the intercranial drain, a procedure performed to drain excess fluid caused by swelling of the brain.

ICU must have been a real trip for my parents and close friends. When I walked back in there 25 days after my entrance on a stretcher, I have to say for a place which doesn't get to see much happiness, they were sure overjoyed to see me. The craziest feeling of all, was the fact that all these people knew me so well, and I did not recognize anyone.

I wasn't too sure how they would accept me, I apparently was quite active while under their care. You see with a brain injury they have to bring you up off drugs every hour to assess brain function; it was a bit of a rodeo ride each hour as I kept nurses and family on their toes. I did the usual hit/kick routine, and some verbalizing, but I also liked to try and stand up in my bed, and pull on the NG (feeding) and catheter tubes, this got me restrained sometimes.

However, the ICU staff still seemed glad to see me up and around, and I was happy to now visit them as a walking, talking, functioning person. I hoped this could make them feel good about their work and show them they truly do perform miracles!

After eight days in ICU I moved to the neurosurgery ward . Here I had to adjust to a different type of medical protocol. They used different drugs, and it was a lot quieter. Mom brought my bedroom lamp, my own pillows, stuffed animals and decorated the walls with get well wishes from friends. Family and close friends were scheduled to be with me 18 hours a day to help out with my nursing care.

Now freshly recovered from the pneumonia, which had set in from the intubation in the ski patrol hut, my throat and mouth were in rough shape. The nurse showed my family how to swab out my mouth as well as turn and move me, that coupled with the body massages and managing an arm tremor kept them busy for these first days.

When I first arrived from ICU I did not have the feeding tube in (because I had pulled it out), and the doctors thought it worth a try for me to eat. Well that didn't work, my weight went below 115lbs from 146lbs, I just couldn't eat enough popsicles to keep me going. So the NG tube went back in, and it was in the days after that, that I really started to heal at an accelerated pace.

Two days later I opened my eyes, even before that though, physiotherapy had already whisked me out of bed in my sleepwalk state making me move around. Randy held me for sustained walks and invented a game called "Catch the Snoopy" while I was being wheeled around in my wheelchair. Neurosurgery doctors and nurses were right there all the time to help my family with my care.

During the following week my recovery seemed to go even faster. I started talking and scoring very high on the Glasgow Coma scale. My medications were being reduced, my arm tremor a distant memory (for my parents as I have no memory of it); I was regaining my independence one step at a time.

Agitation was my biggest challenge, and it was my desire to go home that finally led me to recover self-control. I was no different from any other brain injured patient, I had lost the capability to cope with moments of frustration. Waking up caused great stress both for me because I didn't remember where I was or what I was doing and for the hospital care givers who had to do night-time sittings.

I am able to recall being ferociously hungry and asking for a peanut buster parfait. Be careful what you ask for you just might get it, after I finished the ice cream treat, I felt quite sick. The next day I pulled the NG tube out for the second and final time and started an eating campaign that could rival anything in Guinness. My grandmother cooked pancakes everyday, and many family friends brought fresh fruit and a myriad of good things to eat. I apparently was eating 6 full meals a day plus snacks, and still felt hungry.

My friends were now allowed to visit. I recall they seemed to spend most of the time laughing at my jokes. Sometimes I would have a hard time remembering who was in to visit me. Mom got our Polaroid camera and photographed the visitors; then she wrote on the photo: names, date and time. This made a big difference for me to re-learn how to remember things and events.

Because my accident was front page news on January 20th, a lot of people were calling or wanting to visit in the hospital to find out how I was doing. Randy set up a website (www.accesswave.ca/~rcurrie) during the week I was in ICU. Somehow my parents managed to keep the website updated so friends and family could check on me whenever they wished. As I got better and was up and around, they posted pictures as well. Although I had a lot of visitors in the hospital, I am sure this website helped keep a lot of people informed enough so that they didn't have to come in.

Then came the moment of truth! The MRI was going to define my new life, it would tell all, no faking it here as to how well I was doing. I really wanted to go home, I obsessed

over it every minute. I knew the results of this test would determine the day of my departure. When my parents left the night before the MRI, I told them I was going to have my best night yet because I had to study for the big test, and I was planning to pass with flying colors. After lying motionless in the tunnel of the MRI for 25 minutes with the loud noises, I was sure the results would confirm this.

Based on the MRI results, and my sessions with the occupational therapists and passing the neuro tests, I got a series of day passes and then I got overnight passes and soon afterwards I was admitted to Rehab as a day patient and not long after that I was discharged from the hospital altogether. On February 13th, 2003 Dr. Brenda Joyce discharged me from Rehab 26 days from the start of my ordeal.

Our house had been modified with extra railings and night time barriers to help keep me safe, and I was told the following restrictions: rest when tired and never get over tired; this would mean taking daytime naps, eating a balanced and careful diet, no going out at night, no consumption of spirits (I was to turn 19 in a month). However, I was allowed to conduct my own self directed physiotherapy by going to the gym and massage therapy. I was to go back to the doctor for a mid April assessment of my progress.

Well I turned 19 almost a month ago. I have no desire to consume “spirits”; I went to Rehab this week where I scored 90% on the neuro-psychological test, and passed the re-evaluation to drive my parents car. My daytime rests are less, I work out at the gym, I go to friend’s houses at night and I have been riding my mountain bike most days, with a helmet of course!

Doing extreme things on skis and bicycles was a huge part of my life, I always wore appropriate safety gear and that ultimately saved my life, now I plan to finish university pursue a career in teaching and take a milder approach to sports.

Was it a miracle for me to make a complete recovery that fast? My family and I were just doing the best we could, and felt blessed and lucky with the outcome.

I’ll leave miracles to God.

But I still can’t wait to ski next year, just maybe not among trees!