

Michael's Story

The Accident

My accident happened on the 13th of May 2008. I was on my way out to my girlfriend Jen's house at Myponga. She had needed urgent major surgery and I was spending every night at her house helping her out. We were committed to each other and just hit it off. On the way out to her place one night a kangaroo jumped in front of my car and apparently I hit it. I was driving my Mitsubishi twin-cab four wheel drive that had a bull-bar on it. Because of the size of the kangaroo, it went under my car. My car was bouncing a bit and the front wheels turned to the right, and when it hit the road again, it shot me across the road and that's when I hit the oncoming Ford. The lady in the Ford died.

They thought I was going to die. A lady called Margie was in another car; she was teaching netball on the Myponga School grounds. She and a couple of her students were on their way back home when the accident happened and they stopped at it. They looked at me, and I must have moved or groaned. I don't know whether I was out to it or not, I can't remember it at all, but they said they could help me. One of them worked out I had a broken neck and so she held it. She was a specialty nurse from Flinders Hospital in the Casualty. The other one was a maternity nurse. I probably could have been killed because of what I'd been through, so she just helped. Then another driver stopped at the accident, and he was a doctor.

He helped me so much and went with me from the accident to Flinders Hospital. I can't remember whether it was the ambulance, or whether it was an ambulance helicopter. I must have passed away on the way, because he brought me back doing a tracheotomy. He happened to be one of the two guys that take care of the Intensive Care Unit at Flinders Hospital.

A Spiritual Visit from My Father

I spent the first week and a bit in hospital and know that I must have passed away and they brought me back, because I got this image of myself looking down at a bed with big bars that were in my feet, coming out the side, and I could look out the hospital window at the car park, and then I could see this green Valiant come up and park in front of the room. My Dad got out, and he

walked over to me and got about a foot and a half away when he said, “You’re going to be alright, son.” After that I don’t remember a thing. At the time he had been dead for 25 years. I kept saying to my partner when she came in, “When are Mum and Dad coming in?” And she said, “Well, you’re Mum will probably come in, but I don’t know about your Dad.” She didn’t want to tell me that he had died, and then when she did I didn’t remember it and she had to tell me this every day for four weeks while I was in Post Traumatic Amnesia (PTA).

Rehabilitation of Acquired Brain Injury

I spent so much time in different sections of Flinders Hospital, and when I was out of PTA I was lucky to get into Hampstead’s Brain Injury Rehabilitation Unit (BIRU). I had speech therapists to help me get some of my speech back, and a whole team who helped me to learn things again. I was in a wheelchair because I had plates in my feet. A man called Simon at BIRU helped me learn to walk again and I treat him with respect because he helped me.

I was allowed to go home and spent nine days or so there before my left ankle swelled up. I couldn’t get my boot on so we went to Flinders Hospital and I was diagnosed with Golden Staph (Staphylococcus) in my ankle bone. They were giving me drugs to try to control it and I had operations every two days to clean it out and. On top of the brain injury, it was just an overload. My partner and I talked about it and we worked it out that the Golden Staph was eating the bone and it would work its way up to my knee and higher. We asked the specialist nurse what the chance was of me having a strong left leg again and she said “zero”.

Amputation of my Left Leg and Foot

I remember saying “Well, if it’s gone and the artificial leg will help me re-build strength in my right ankle, then that’s what we should do.” The doctors had differing opinions so we said, “No, that’s it ... take it off, that gets rid of what used to be my ankle all together and the bug, and then I can spend time re-building my right ankle, and use the artificial leg.” So I had part of my left leg and foot amputated. I had to learn to walk again without my leg.

My Experience of Rehabilitation after Amputation

I stayed positive and it worked out. I learnt to walk again at the Repatriation Hospital with the help of a molded leg. I couldn't feel below my knee, and it was difficult picking up my feet and learning how to turn because if I started to twist too quickly I could injure my other leg. We went to amputee gym every morning for months, and I learnt to walk really well.

I met a man called Cliff from Brain Injury Rehabilitation Community and Home (BIRCH) at Felixstow while I was in BIRU. He was persistent in asking me how I would do this and that, and then all of a sudden, different things that I used to do would click into position, and I would understand. I'd explain how I would have done it before the accident, for example my woodwork. I found out that I still had the knowledge of how to do woodwork. He helped me further while I did outpatient rehab at BIRCH. He still works with me now, at home, and he is a great friend and support. I've been able to remember a lot, but there are certain things I can't remember. I did the re-connect course for the Brain Injury Network of South Australia (BINSAs), one day a week, for so many weeks, and about three quarters of the way through, they put out some forms, and it had a lot of questions, like, "Will you go back to work?" Since I've been doing lots and lots of rehabilitation, and talking to other people about what they've been through, I've found that helped a little bit.

Marriage and Family

My life centres on Jen and our family. Jen has two daughters who are 13 and 14, and my daughter with my first wife, is now 22. Jen and I got married out on the farm when I got home after learning to walk again. While I was in BIRU, I noticed people's relationships with their partners breaking down. Since then I've found out people are not understanding about brain injury.

Jen was a lecturer in business and accounting, she's been into learning and she understands so much, and that has brought us even closer together. She got into bridal jewelry and had her own business which had to close down after the accident. She could always return to lecturing if she wanted to. I'm getting back into woodwork.

Returning to Woodwork

My woodwork is more art than furniture. I take bits and pieces and make a nice piece out of the whole lot. I change things. For example, I once got a mirrored cupboard from a bathroom wall that was painted white, and I added legs from a table and some timber from something else. At the moment I'm working with recycled wood. It's about making broken pieces beautiful and useful again – just like me.

The Importance of being Positive

I've tried not to have downers ... I've tried to have positive thoughts. Sometimes I shift my mind to concentrate on something else – like doing things on the computer. I stick with a positive attitude, and my sense of humour has kept me going. I know that Jen's helped me. Nobody really knows that you're getting over a brain injury because they can't see anything and sometimes that makes it hard.

Enabling Factors in my Recovery

My woodworking ability, my relationship with my partner and being on the farm permanently has really helped me recover. Before, Jen and I were sort of "finger-tipped" together, whereas now, because we've both sold the businesses, we're married and we're both on the farm, we're like interlocking fingers. We have more time for each other, and that's a benefit. Of course, understanding what I've been through helps as well, but I also know that, because I was in a coma for a lot of the time, I have no idea of what damage Jen saw.

That's probably more devastating for her than me really, knowing what had happened. I don't really understand how much of my upper body got damaged. I'd power myself out of the bed, into the wheelchair, with the big 'stakes' still coming out of my feet. I'd scoot off down the road, and I had no idea of the damage I had. I'm lucky because I can walk and talk. I am lucky I am alive and I am proud of the fact that I was healthy enough for them to be able to save me.

Some doctors said there was a possibility that I may never walk or talk again. I could have been lying in bed unable to do or say anything. People have been amazed at how much recovery I have made. I put it down to willpower and

determination. I am a determined, helpful person; I want to help people do different things, or to do jobs to help people.

Parental Influence

I'm the youngest of a family of six kids. My eldest sister lives with a disability. I was born in Adelaide before moving to Mt Gambier over by the saw mill. My Mum and Dad were ace ... they were brilliant and hard working. My Dad did various jobs, laying pipes for the sewerage, running a Super Elliot shop, selling bikes, fire arms and sporting equipment. At one stage he was the Secretary of the Mount Gambier Table Tennis Association.

Volunteering at BIRU

I volunteer once a week at Hampstead Rehabilitation Centre and I love doing this. I live at Myponga, so it's a 1.5 hour drive down the road, but I'm volunteering because they're setting up a men's shed. I want to give back to the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Unit and I can help different people there. I still know a lot about woodwork. The manager there, Cliff, is a mechanical and metalwork-type worker and so our work complements each other.

Re-organising my life

I am happy because I enjoy life in the country. I spend my time working on the farm. I do my artwork/woodwork and I'm starting to collect a few bits and pieces. I've gone from a 150 square metre workshop at Hackham, down to a 50 square metre workshop in a farm shed. Our financial situation has changed – we have much less money.

Some things have changed in my relationship with Jen's girls, but it's getting back to what it used to be. My willingness to have a go at everything has been important.

We have had bus tours out at the farm, and people come and have a look at what's going on and have a cuppa. We have two or three buses a month now. It's just taking off. We tell them about the accident and brain injury, but more so our story about how to be resilient after a life changing event. We sell jams and chutneys and lots of home cooked goodies too.

Suggestions for Others

I try and stick to positive thinking and very rarely entertain negative thoughts. I am a person who wants to make the best of things. A sense of humour is important! I make a joke of what I've been through – for example, when I saw the pictures of the accident site, of the car I had just bought four weeks before, I thought, "The tyres are still pumped up; I could sell the mags and tyres for \$300."

It's also important not to get wrapped up in yourself. A lot of people would walk up to me sitting in my wheelchair and say, "Oh, sorry about that." They don't really understand. If you find the best in as much as you can, I think that helps everybody. Saying to people in a wheelchair, "Oh, how do you put up with that?" is not helpful. But to come along and say, "Oh, I can see you're having a 'wheely' good time" hopefully puts a smile on their face. My friends Cliff will pat me on the back every now and then because somebody will come into the men's shed where I volunteer with a really sad face and when they leave, they've got this huge smile. Apparently I cheer them up, and I don't realise I do, but it's me, and that's the thing, to be able to cope with what I've been through, I've tried to concentrate on positive thoughts, and my sense of humour. I also talk to people I know who are recovering from brain injury about how I've coped, and I get some other thoughts from them.

I know I'll never, ever get back to what I used to be like, but it's good fun trying.

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