

Phil's Story:

Phil's story was told during an interview. This is the transcript.

The Accident

My interest in Speedway started way back in 1962 and spanned some 30 years. In 1992, I finally achieved my goal of winning the National Speedcar Championship and decided to retire from racing at the end of the 1993 season.

On April 2 1993, during the last race of the season – the State Speedcar Championship – I was involved in a crash and my car was catapulted over a five metre safety fence. I didn't realise at the time that I was outside the race circuit in the spectator area. I thought I was hanging on the safety fence because I could see members of the crash crew and paramedics below me.

The position I was in made it difficult for them to reach and rescue me. I remember thinking my legs were jammed because I couldn't get out of the car when I tried, but once the doctor and ambulance crew carried out some checks, they discovered I wasn't getting any response in my legs.

The Rescue 1 Helicopter was called from the Royal Adelaide Hospital (RAH). Ironically, some 15 years later, the paramedic with the helicopter was the person who presented me my Senior Australian of the Year Award at Government House in Adelaide.

At the time of the accident my two youngest children, Chad and Kate, were at college. I was in a demanding role as a property manager for a construction company where I had been involved in building shopping centres, hospitals and hotels, and travelling interstate to oversee building contracts. My wife and I had been planning to take our children to Disneyland in three months' time.

The Spinal Injuries Unit

I was one of a number of patients in the Spinal Injury Unit at the RAH. I had suffered a spinal cord injury, was no longer able to walk and would need a wheelchair for mobility and independence. My spinal cord injury was at T6/7 in the thoracic area, quite high in the chest and was complete which meant there'd be no recovery because the spinal cord had been severed.

I was told I would have to look after my bowel and bladder in a totally different way. To be told I would never walk again was devastating and I didn't accept it for some time. I thought it was something I could overcome or remedy. I soon realised I could quite easily have become a quadriplegic.

For three weeks I was stationed alongside a young chap from Victor Harbor who had been a passenger in the back of a sports car during an accident and as a result, his neck had been broken. He had no use of his hands and had to be fed – he couldn't even scratch his eye.

It was a reality check. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and thought how lucky I was to still have the use of my hands and arms, even though I had no sensation in them at the time. My hand felt like I was wearing a baseball glove and I kept spilling food all over myself.

I was flat on my back because I had no balance, and eating from an overhead tray with the aid of a mirror. My son would come in to visit and take all the Weetbix out of my hair and off my chest, telling me “Dad, you’re a messy eater”. I couldn’t even blow out the candles on my birthday cake when celebrating my 51st birthday in hospital.

My dear mother visited me every week. She was very religious with a positive attitude and believed there was a higher power in control of our lives. She told me things happen for a reason, and soon I would find out what that reason was. She also gave me a fridge magnet which said “Don’t worry about what you can’t do, concentrate on what you can” and told me I would find something I could do as I always had.

She said, “If you were meant to be killed in that accident, you would have been. You’ve been saved for a greater purpose.” When I left the hospital she sent me a ‘good luck’ card which said “When the door on your life slammed shut on April 2nd, you will find that a window of opportunity was opened by somebody.”

Adjusting to Change

Little did I know the impact my injury would have on every aspect of my life, our future decisions and lifestyle - it affected my employment, financial circumstances and our home needed modifications to make it wheelchair accessible. It was pretty tough, not only for me, but also for my wife Coleen.

While I was still in hospital, an occupational therapist visited our house and told my wife we should consider looking for somewhere more “wheelchair friendly”. We had lived in the house for 12 years, had good neighbours and our children attended the local school. The possibility of relocating was difficult to face. I remember wanting to go straight to the house and see how difficult it was going to be.

I had always been in control before. Everyone looked up to me for direction and in business I was a project leader ... and I liked it. I didn’t like what I now saw in the mirror, and maneuvering around in a wheelchair was not something I had ever imagined doing. I didn’t like the loss of my independence, or the fact I needed help to open doors or to get up ramps and steps.

I didn’t like what I’d become, I felt very inadequate and had trouble adapting. I remember thinking it would have been better if I hadn’t made it or if something happened now (I had collapsed lungs and was having trouble breathing) I didn’t want to be resuscitated.

Returning to Work

I returned to work for three months part-time but found it very difficult, especially as I had only been discharged from hospital three or four months earlier. It was terrible - I was having bowel accidents and my bladder was leaking. I wasn't in control of myself and when attending building site meetings, would often find myself wet ... it was a disaster.

I quickly realised I wasn't quite ready for it all. Leading up to Christmas of 1993, the company said "I think you should take a break and get your head around all that you are dealing with. We will review the situation in the New Year."

Getting Back My Life and Giving Back to the Community

I began talking with [Paraquad SA](#) to get involved in functions at their rehab centre where I attended two to three times a week as an outpatient. A group of us got together to organise barbeques for the inpatients to give them something to do on weekends as it's a very lonely place. Families were always there for them initially, but usually had to return back to work, their farms or their businesses.

One young lady from the country was struggling to be away from her family and the functions enabled her to speak to others in similar circumstances. I also became a member of [Wheelchair Sports](#) and got involved in their basketball team, but I fell out of my chair more than I was in it, so I got involved with their support staff and became a member of the Board of Management and their Fundraising Program.

There was a lady in the Paraquad Association from Waikerie who had been in hospital at the same time as I was. She had been involved in a car accident and was now a quadriplegic. Being one of seven children, her parents had very little money and couldn't afford to make their home wheelchair accessible. So the Speedway fraternity and Paraquad SA put on an event to raise money to buy her a special wheelchair so she could get involved in Wheelchair Sports.

While volunteering at the Hampstead Centre I met a chap who was a peer mentor and had fallen out of his car and busted a collarbone. He was off work for six to eight weeks and I was asked to fill his role with Paraquad SA. I also met a lady called Vicki at the Hampstead Centre, a paralympian and member of the swimming team, who was a volunteer doing handcraft, board games and various other things.

I organised funding through Physiotherapy SA to get tracksuits and carry bags for the junior swimming team. Vicki and I worked together to help some of the female patients come to terms with their injuries and issues and she joined the Paraquad SA board as a volunteer in the Peer Support Program.

We decided to entertain people on weekends and follow-up on their progress when they went home, which meant I did a lot of home visits. I also invited people to my own home to show them what could be done to a house to make it wheelchair-friendly and to let them see that it didn't have to look like a hospital or rehab centre.

I then started designing home modifications and offering suggestions to some of the inpatients. Some of my friends made equipment and I had ramps installed in their homes because sometimes they could not afford it. The ramps available were not always adequate so we had larger aluminum ramps made similar to those we use on race-car trailers.

I encountered so many challenges and would think to myself, I know someone who can help with that ... or we can do this ... or we can do that. It also took my mind off of my own problems and showed me that other people had bigger issues than I did - I had a family, support and friends who were always willing to help.

Even now, I'm not able to decline anybody who asks for my help. I've found that people listen to me. I'm able to explain problems and what can be done to fix them, and never get angry or demand anything, rather I suggest different options.

I am a Steering Committee Member of the Continence Foundation of Australia and also on the Transport Advisory Board and Paraquad SA. I'm a Member of the Occupational Health and Safety Committee, the Transitional Housing Group for South Australia and on the Mitcham Council Board for Services for People with Disabilities.

I'm also on the Driver Intervention Program with Transport SA for young 'L' and 'P' Plate offenders, warning them that if they continue to drive in a dangerous manner and take risks at high speeds, they could end up, like me, in a wheelchair.

I've always enjoyed having people around me and everything I have succeeded in, be it building a bridge or anything else, has always required a team of good people. Working as a project manager you can't succeed without a good team, their cooperation, trust and appreciation. It's important to thank people for their hard work and effort, and to encourage them to be proud about what they're doing. I enjoy encouraging people and providing them some support and assistance, along with a good sense of humour.

Strength and Support

It's okay to laugh at yourself, and sometimes get angry and frustrated, but often we direct those things at the people we love ... and for that I am sorry. Some people worse off than I am have inspired me with what they've been able to achieve. They may not have had the same support, but with just pushing a few things in their direction, sometimes through sports, sometimes through work, sometimes just by being there, they have succeeded in their goals and challenges.

Some people wanted to end it all, using drugs or alcohol to overdose. Some suffered severe burns or inflicted themselves with other injuries and ended up back in hospital. People suffer isolation and loneliness because their support has collapsed around them, often due to financial issues or relationship breakdowns. Support and finances are very important.

Support from family and friends is vital, particularly when you're discharged from hospital or rehabilitation. Those first few months at home can be very challenging

and sometimes frustrating. To have someone there to assist and encourage you is comforting. I don't think I'd be where I am today without the people I had around me. They just kept pushing me on and asking "What do you need? Can we help you? How do you keep doing this?" I said, "Because you guys have helped me and I've never wanted to let anybody down."

The other issue many people face is the financial impact of not earning a salary, especially if they are not compensable or covered by work cover or third party insurance. This stress is compounded if they are the 'bread winner' of the family - not being able to pay for groceries, utility bills, vehicle costs and rent or mortgage repayments, can put severe pressure on relationships.

Any savings people have are quickly consumed and receiving final notices for payments can cause anger, frustration and hopelessness. I always say to people in these situations "Don't burn your bridges" because the people who love you, who you will likely get angry at, are the people who will be there for you through thick and thin. My message is to cherish your support. You may sometimes abuse it, but please always say, "Sorry, I didn't mean it."

You can never prepare yourself for something like this happening, whether you suffer a spinal cord injury or a stroke. Often people with an amputation can still walk or get a prosthesis fitted, but with a spinal cord injury or a stroke, where you lose control of everything and you've got to rebuild the blocks, sometimes it's two or three paces forward and a couple back.

As I just said to my dear friend who's had a stroke, "It's called 'PT'... it's all about 'patience' and 'time!' In the end, all we want is control of our lives, equality and understanding. Patience is a virtue ... and a sense of humour really helps too!

The Highlights

I would like to mention the following highlights from the last ten years:

- Being awarded Senior Australian of the Year 2007 and having lunch at the Lodge in Canberra with then Prime Minister the Honorable John Howard and Governor General Major General Michael Jeffery.
- Becoming a member of the Australia Day Council as Ambassador.
- Being awarded Life Membership of the Paragard Association of SA in 2008.
- Being a Facilitator in the [Driver Intervention Program](#).
- Being a member of the Steering Committee of the [Continence Foundation of Australia](#).
- Playing a part in the [C.A.A.S scheme](#) being extended to persons over 65 years of age with a disability and children under the age of 16 years which was rubber stamped for approval by then Prime Minister the Honorable John Howard and his Minister for Health following my visit on January 26th 2008.

Finally, my thanks to a very dear friend, Helen Walker, who has given her time and expertise to me in many of these ventures.

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