

## Lost & Found.

Sometimes something hurts you so bad, you can't feel it. Nothing makes sense and you can't comprehend what's going on until something makes you feel again. Then it all comes back.....

You can't understand where I'm coming from. Even if you asked. Even if you listened. You couldn't really understand, hear, see, or feel what I've been through. You can't comprehend my story, until you've walked my path. You haven't seen what I've seen.

This is the story of who I am. It seems like the same things that held me up, forced me down.

My whole world got turned upside down and all

order disappeared. Nothing was how it was supposed to be. I was trapped in my own life, drowned in the sorry's of my soul.



*(Introduction).*

Its so infuriating, I don't remember many of the greatest moments in my life, I start conversations and forget what I was talking about, I obsess with pointless arguments just to get my views in and I don't look at photos of myself before my injury because I don't want to know how I used to be. My life has been turned around in ways I've never thought possible, it feels like I fell asleep and woke up in a tumble dryer.

But, if their is one thing thats for sure, I'm determined. That's the one quality I possessed before my injury that's pulled me through so far. If theirs one thing I can be certain of .

*I'm stuffed if I'm going to let my injury have it all.....*

This is a devastating, exhausting and frustrating story that needs to be told. It's the story about my Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) I experienced 10 months ago. I need to get it off my chest before I can reveal the new type of person I have become. I'm writing this story, so I don't have to relive my horrendous ordeal. I am very aware that frontline and PTS have so many questions to ask me about my injury but without being rude, I just want to write 2013 out of my books, forget about my injury and try and move on with my life.

In the following months you will see me around as I slowly return to a job I can't even remember doing. The last 10 months has been like an earthquake in my brain and unfortunately, it hasn't knocked any sense into me. It's like the earthquake struck down bridges, damaged highways, and disrupted communication. Some of these have been rebuilt others are under repair but one thing that's for sure. I'm not completely the same person I was before my injury.

Honestly, I'm learning to live in a brain that feels like it belongs to a stranger. It's the hardest thing that I have ever gone through. Its a constant struggle that I'm continuously battling. I just want my life back..... Only thing is, I have my life back and I just have to come to terms with the new brain I'm entrapped in and accept the new way in which I think. This story is unbelievably frustrating, exceedingly isolating but inconceivably amusing.

*(back-round)*

To understand my story, we have to go back a few years. In 2005, whilst studying for my Bachelor of Forestry Sciences Degree at the University of Canterbury, I was approached by an international job agency that offered to find me a position in the United States over the University break. Being an avid outdoors person who enjoyed winter sports, I went along to one of their seminars and took up a Snowboarding Instructors position in the North West State of Washington.

I was so excited to have found employment abroad that the mountain of paperwork didn't dent my enthusiasm. I was posted for five months for the duration of the winter on a ski field two hours East of Seattle. I thoroughly enjoyed my time but living on a mountain that was constantly abuzz with 24 hour access to over 1900 skiable acres, 4 terrain parks and as much 'off piste' terrain I could get my hands on, had its consequences.

Eventually, I returned to New Zealand five weeks after my degree had commenced with seven broken bones and a ACL reconstruction. It's hard to explain but my injuries didn't impact on my enthusiasm or my degree and I wound up returning the following year.

After I returned back to NZ, I started a job working for the State Forests of NSW in Australia but even living in OZ didn't distill my enjoyment for winter sports.

I found every so often I'd jump the ditch and return home for yet another snowboarding trip to Queenstown. On one specific evening, I was returning home to my family in nearby Te Anau, when I came across an ambulance having a bit of trouble fitting a set of snow chains and struggling to climb a hill. Being late at night, with a lot of snow and a status 2 patient on board I rendered my assistance. I fitted the snow chains and accompanied the driver down to Invercargill hospital.

It's a trip I will never forget. I was so intrigued with the work the St John member in the back was doing for this patient who was experiencing a bit of chest pain that by the time I had returned home to Te Anau, I found my self questioning why I had done a forestry degree.

You can probably relate to it, but the atmosphere in the ambulance was a bit tense. We not only had a patient in agony, we were trying to co-ordinate backup to a remote location, fitting snow chains and we had only one Emergency Medical technician (EMT) who was operating under my watchful eye. It's hard to say, but although they were stretched for resources and the mood was palpable I thrived on the chaos.

Anyway once they had cleared from the job at Southland hospital, we had a discussion and they talked me through the job. Don't ask me how it happened because I swear I was the most medically incompetent person out there. But, somehow by the time we had returned to Te Anau, I had been convinced to come along to one of station training nights. The rest is history, but I wound up doing the first responder course in Te Anau then moving up to Auckland to complete the National Diploma course and pursue a career as an EMT.

Whilst up here, I continued my forestry work in the Northland area but it was the alluring love for a certain girl that made me call Auckland home. I worked in the Northland area for a further eighteen months but after a lot of volunteer shifts and the odd event, I took the plunge and applied for a job with the patient transfer services (PTS). It was the perfect job to consolidate and reinforce the skills I had been taught on my National Diploma in Ambulance Practice course.

I used this to my advantage and gleaned a huge amount of information from other medics, station resources, the patients we transported and the many departments we were visiting on a daily basis. I thoroughly enjoyed my role and subconsciously, I found I was diligently going about my job with meticulous effort. It may have only been patient transfers, but it was a job I thoroughly enjoyed and took such pride in that my forestry career became obsolete and my sole desire was to pursue a career within the the organisation.

The last six months of 2012 I had way too much on my plate, but PTS was the perfect job to strengthen all these new skills I was learning. For some reason and it was probably my ignorance, I

still wanted to broaden my medical knowledge. So I, maintained my academic work, continued my EMT course, undertook volunteer ambulance shifts from Warkworth and pressed on with my PTS job. Somehow, I managed it but don't ask me how! I completed all this work without breaching my ambulance hours or burning out. Besides, if that wasn't enough try adding love to the equation.

Despite all that was going on, my mounting pile of study with a ridiculous work volume in an occupation I was still coming to terms with. I only had one thing on my mind. It's now January 2013 and the only way to put a fitting conclusion to the end of a two year relationship was to get married. My wife and I tied the knot in the Bay of Islands on the 10/01/13.

We didn't have time for a honeymoon, and I was put straight out on the road again. That being said, after 6 months of work commitments, and juggling my EMT course, I booked some annual leave and took a week off work. I felt like we deserved it, and it came at just the right time, finally I could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

My wife and I booked accommodation in a secluded location away from all of life's pressures. We just wanted a chance to have some 'us time' and get Auckland in our rearview mirror. We had it all sorted, horse riding, tramping, the trans alpine railway and of course we weren't too far from a ski field. We planned it well and I intended to complete my EMT course and go in for my final interview the week I returned. It was going to be a week my wife will never forget and a flight I wish I never boarded.

#### *(My accident)*

We touched down in Christchurch on a stunning winters morning. It was a decent frost that ensured us of the clear, cloudless day ahead. Since it was our first holiday together, we were in high spirits and we quickly got our hire car sorted and hightailed it out of the city. Taking things at a leisurely pace we sorted a picnic, stopped by a river and took pleasure in the rural ambience before the crisp winter chill advised us, it was better to move on. We headed a little further into the Southern Alps and checked into our wonderful little lodge.

The following morning dawned and we were both in a lax mindset. Having no concrete plans we climbed the road to Mt Hutt for an action packed day of excitement on the ski field. There was a fresh dusting of snow the night before which set the scene for a superb day. That being said we bought our passes and promptly took the next chairlift to the summit. It was our first run for the day so my wife and I took an intermediate trail to start with. Needless to say, it was a trail her husband was very familiar with and we mysteriously wound up at the top of the terrain park.

From this point onwards and for the following five months my story is told through my loving wife and dedicated families eyes. Its been a long transition to independence but a road well travelled. You can think of it as a giant puzzle. Fortunately, all the pieces are there, its just that their all scrambled and in the wrong order. I'm not lying when I say, I'm still trying to make sense of it. Before I continue, it is important to remember that I have no recollection of the following events. At times it may have appeared like I was conscious, alert and aware of everything. But the truth is I have a complete five month memory blank. I officially, recovered from my post traumatic amnesia



(PTA) in November but I still had no solid recollection of events until after New Years and even my more recent memory has been scratchy. The fact I'm still living and breathing today and I've made such an immense improvement over the last ten months is solely attributable to my committed, supportive and loving companion.

It was Sunday the 28th of July and still the early hours of the day. Fortunately, my wife and I had a brief discussion at the terrain park and we arranged to meet each other at the chairlift before taking our next run to the top.

What happened next is not exactly clear but the jump I was attempting was one of the more advanced features in the park. It was estimated most snowboarders needed about nine metres of air to clear the fifteen meter jump before the landing started. The one witness who came forward said that I was attempting a switch, frontside 720, unfortunately I didn't complete the full rotation, caught my toe edge and used my head to break my fall.

Being a safety conscious boarder I was wearing a helmet which likely saved my life. Safety aside, my helmet was now lying smashed beside me and irregardless of exactly what happened ski patrol was right on the mark. They had me collared, scooped, immobilised and had notified R41 before they even packaged me. From there, I was brought down to the medics room, where they rapidly reassessed me, at this stage my breathing was ineffective and I had a GCS of five.

It can't have taken them long, maybe a little more than fifteen minutes to get me all sorted but my ordeal was far from over yet. Meanwhile my wife was so eager to get on her ski's, she gave up waiting for me at the base area and tried to take the next lift up. Miraculously, they had already managed to block my wife's ski pass and a staff member escorted her to the medics room where they broke the dreaded news.

There was a Dr. and two medics who managed my injuries in the first aid room. By now my GCS had dropped to three and my breathing was deteriorating. They exchanged the oral pharyngeal (OP) airway for a Laryngeal mask airway (LMA) and aggressively treated me with opioids and midazolam. Thankfully ski patrol had already requested a helicopter whilst on scene immobilising me. Westpac who was in the area were diverted from a beacon search and landed some ten minutes later.

My wife, Nakita was loaded into the chopper whilst they transferred me into the back. It was about this time that I went into cardiac arrest, likely from the increased intracranial pressure or my inadequate breathing. Thankfully Nakita was buckling up in the front of the chopper and not exposed to the ensuing resuscitation attempt, thankfully they got me back after the second shock. Upon landing at Christchurch hospital I was brought into resus. They must have done what was necessary before separating my wife and I and hooking me up to a life support unit. I was then wheeled up to the intensive critical care unit (ICU) where I was reunited with my wife. There I remained in both a natural and induced coma for the following few weeks.

This was certainly the most anxious few hours of my wife's life. Not only was she in an unfamiliar city with no one to comfort her but her husband was only inches from death and the doctors were not updating her with much good news. My wife diligently called and updated my brother, who lived in Raingiora, in North Canterbury. He then made an impressive drive into Christchurch hospital to comfort my unconsolable wife and provide whatever assistance was needed.

After being lightly comforted my wife took the reigns and did an admirable job of informing family and friends. This must have been an exhaustingly difficult task considering all the questions family members must have been interrogating her with, the situation she was facing and the fact that the doctors weren't offering much reassurance.

The following days would have been painfully difficult for Nakita but she put on a brave face and tackled each new trial as it presented. Considering the anguish of her ordeal and seeing her husband lying unresponsive in a coma must have called for many sleepless nights. No matter how much



comfort and reassurance family could provide this was still her husband she had married six months earlier. How she did it I don't know, but she diligently stood by my bedside every day and she wouldn't budge until staff urged her to return to her hotel. Even then it probably took a few tears before she could finally get some sleep.

Once news was out and people understood the severity of the situation, family flew in from all parts of the country to render as much support, help and comfort for my anxious wife through those dark days. One aunty in specific, dropped her job and was by my beside by the following morning. She did a brilliant job, taking the load off my wife and easing her pain.

My parents at that stage were running and actively operating the day to day activities of a volunteer orphanage in Kenya. It was some length of time before they received the dreaded phone call, mainly due to lack of communication in that part of the world but it didn't take long for the foreboding news to sink in. My parents did eventually talk with one of my doctors who advised to take the next plane out, as they were most likely returning for a funeral. It took a few days for my parents to wrap up the last of their duties and get down to Nairobi. An agonising few days I bet, but they caught the next available flight and were headed home.

It must have been about this time, almost a week after my injury that they tried to bring me out of my coma. The first few attempts were unsuccessful, although they had a few more over the following week. When I did awake from my coma my wife was overjoyed, now she at least had a glimmer of hope to hold onto.

I may of spent most of my time sleeping but it was the small things that answered her prayers. I knew my brothers voices, I persistently twisted her wedding ring and I would only answer her questions, albeit, by squeezing her fingers. She had faith and a strong belief that things would improve. Somehow, I was able to restore a twinkle to those eyes during one of the most difficult times in her life.

I spent two weeks going between ICU and the specialty neurological high dependency unit. They focused on preventing blood clots, put me through numerous CT scans, continuously monitored my ICP and had the surgical team on standby should I deteriorate. However, being oblivious to it all, that probably didn't matter much for a patient who was sleeping close on 23 hours a day.

A fortnight passed before I was discharged from Christchurch hospital and admitted into Auckland hospital. It was my manager who had the opportunity to assist with the Life flight transfer back to Auckland. Colleges later recounted how I presented. I must of had a very vacant look on my face as it did not appear as if I was comprehending anything, let alone recognising my friends.

Occasionally I was talking but I kept things brief, I was drowsy, inactive and I had a low level of alertness. I must have been a classic example of, "the lights are on but no one's home".

I spent a further week in auckland hospital where I underwent further testing to determine the extent of my neurological capacity. Obviously, there was a significant number of axons, neurones and neurological pathways that had been torn or damaged from the force of the impact I had sustained from my accident. They explained it would take years possibly decades to repair the damage inflicted to those neurological pathways.

It was going to be a long journey and it would take some time for those transmissions to be restored and coordinated properly again. My head injury was diagnosed as a diffuse axonal injury, think of it as a severe whiplash inside your brain followed by a massive shockwave. For all those medical



people a contra coup injury closely followed by a severe isotropic stress. Whilst in Auckland they assessed the capacity of my cognitive, emotional and behavioural abilities, before I was admitted into a brain rehabilitation centre in West Auckland (ABI).

Upon being admitted to ABI it became very obvious to the physiotherapists treating me that I had marked hemiplegia on my right side. I managed hygiene, cleaning and bathroom breaks with my wheelchair and the strength and assistance of my dedicated wife, but even these exposed challenges. It was still quite a few weeks before I could self mobilise and even when I could walk again, I was assisted with the help of a walking belt. Short walks (less than 100 meters) to see my therapists became a nightmare. Not only was my walking uncoordinated, but my hand eye coordination was off too. I would often stumble or fall and I was plagued with frequent spells of lightheadedness and vertigo.

The team at ABI did a fantastic job, they took all my shortcomings in their stride. At this stage I was completely unaware of my surroundings, I had trouble staying awake whilst people were talking to me, I couldn't recall day to day things, it was as if I was in a different world. Being used to brain injured patients they assisted me with all my rehabilitation efforts whilst treating me with dignity and respect.

I was regularly exposed to physiotherapists, speech and language, occupational therapists and psychologists. On top of this their was daily activities I was encouraged to participate in to speed up my recovery. These were early days, but I had big lapses in my short term memory, I was still confused by many situations and I was very slow to react.

It was here at ABI that I had to learn how to do some of life's simplest tasks. I had to learn how to talk properly, how to read and write, when to go to sleep and how to brush my teeth. My wife and staff members must have felt like they were trying to train a child. Honestly, I'm glad I can't remember it.

There were a few things they didn't need to teach me though. For example, how to say and do inappropriate things or use derogatory language, funnily enough I could do all these myself.

My admission with ABI was extensive and exhausting for Nakita, but she stuck with me for the full 11 weeks. It was during my stay here that friends, family and PTS staff came visiting. I acquired quite an impressive pile of chocolate and other culinary delights during my recovery. Only problem was I no longer had a sweet tooth. In fact there was a huge list of things I enjoyed before my injury that much to the distain of others I simply wouldn't touch.

My time at ABI presented a lot of challenges. I didn't like the place very much and I must have felt like they were holding me a hostage. So, yes, I did try to escape. Fortunately, I was in a secure unit, so my break for freedom wound up in the staffroom where I was found distressed, yelling and crying my eyes out. I was later escorted back to my room where I guess they monitored me a bit more closely.

Still due to my ignorance or possibly my distain for the wonderful care they were providing me. I decided to starve myself. It didn't matter how hungry I was, I no longer trusted the food they were serving me. I simply wouldn't eat anything until such time someone could prove to me it hadn't been poisoned. I know the way in which I was thinking seems absurd but to me, well, I thought it was completely logical.

Despite all these issues, something must have been working upstairs. Slowly, a level of awareness and realisation of my injury sunk in. Over the following weeks my memory and recollection improved. I started to utilise some of the strategies being taught to improve my processing of information. By now I was attending group sessions and I was able to play games which were mildly complex such a scrabble, chess and table tennis (don't ask about my hand eye co-ordination and table tennis).

When the odd PTS ambulance stopped by to drop off yet another patient I wouldn't be far away. I was eager and wanted to feel part of the team so my job was to clear the ambulance. Whether I used the right codes or not is another story.

Finally my discharge date arrived and I was allowed to go home. The improvements I had made during my stay at ABI were very evident and there was a reason why I progressed so well. My hard work, commitment to rehab and positive attitude had paid off. Unfortunately, this is where my story gets worse.

At home I tried to live as the man I was before my injury. My attempts to resume life as I knew it were futile and to no avail. All that happened was I exposed a raft of new problems. I felt like I was a stranger in my own house which just got me increasingly frustrated and annoyed.

I no longer knew who I was.



*(creating a new story)*

I fully comprehend that as a person with a brain injury, I have been hurt and traumatised by forces most people can't imagine and probably won't understand. I now deal with a number of challenges that I never expected or imagined. The one major trial I face is making sense of a life that is disrupted and perhaps altered forever.

I do realise that in the end every brain injury is going to be as unique as the person who experienced it but there are many common symptoms. I shared typical emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, and anxiety with thousands of other TBI patients. Mine were all accompanied by difficulties with memory, pain, mood swings and the challenges of maintaining relationships. But whilst I had my individual hurdles at least I was learning to jump again.

One of the biggest issues, comes in the form of revealing my new self to family, friends, staff and loved ones. This is very difficult. Often people don't realise or understand the changes my injury has caused in me. These are often changes and adjustments I don't understand either, but the hardest thing I find is being accepted as a new person who still has value and whose life still holds meaning and purpose. However, no matter how many challenges my brain has created for me, one thing is for sure. I have a story to tell.

The following is a month by month journal of my recovery to date.

It's now **NOVEMBER** 2013 and my stroke of insight into understanding TBI's from an EMT's perspective now comes from my own voice. I'm now living in my own home again but I have so many restrictions. For Nakita and our landlord it must have been like having to child proof their house all over again. The downstairs, area was closed off, doors locked and I wasn't allowed in the kitchen without constant supervision.

This was a rude awakening as the kitchen was my preferred environment before my injury but I simply couldn't be trusted and got up to all sorts of mischief. My wife had the task of ensuring elements weren't left on, that things wouldn't get burned and I even needed assistance finding simple items such as pots and pans.

My speech and language, physiotherapists and psychologists all stayed in place so my recovery to date wouldn't go backwards. Community therapists now came to our place where my rehab

continued. I don't know how to explain it but maybe I was motivated by the fear. I certainly didn't want to end up like many of the other TBI patients I had both treated and transported prior to my injury. So I can tell you, it was a dedicated effort and I made a conscientious effort to do all the homework my therapists set me.

Prior to my injury I had green fingers and enjoyed a bit of time in the garden. However, now I was taking it too far! On top of the planting and weeding I would spend countless hours at night or at least a good part of the evening looking for slugs in the garden. (Whatever happened to slug bait!) My obsession, became a nightly ritual and Nakita would come cheek on me during the ad breaks. I imagine it was a good way to give her a bit of a break from my constant talking and my innocuous but repetitive mood swings.

I became very particular with a lot of the little things. For example no one was allowed to stack the dishwasher and it had to be done my way, I became very meticulous about how I hung the washing and there was no point in arguing with the way I done things.

Anyway, once I was settled in my home environment it was a slow introduction back to the community. I was so impressed the first time I bought something at the supermarket, it was a major achievement, albeit that I had no idea of the PIN attached to my EFTPOS card. Or when I finally plucked up the courage to actually say "Hi" to the checkout lady. I was over the moon and it must have been pretty obvious. She was probably a little confused as she overheard me telling my wife about how confident I was in talking to strangers now.

Going out in public must have been very difficult. Not only did I have trouble talking to people but now I was in the habit of speaking my mind. I'd say exactly what I was thinking and occasionally that was accompanied by some colourful adjectives. Saying inappropriate comments aloud was one thing but throwing a tantrum and having angry outbursts in the mall was another. Yeah, that was the last time I was taken into Westfield Albany for a while.

It was the height of summer and the silly season was fast approaching. This called for a lot more activity in the neighbourhood. **DECEMBER** presented a whole lot of other social problems. This was meant to be an enjoyable time, a chance to catchup with family and friends but I was struggling to adjust back to society.

This certainly wasn't how I imagined life to be like after saying "I do". Our roles have been reversed, instead of being the head of the household, supporting, leading and protecting my wife, I found that she had picked up my role and I was now looking to her for guidance.

We had a lot of visitors at this time. Having both sides of the family frequently stopping by did a brilliant job of restoring my confidence but there were some people I just didn't want to be around. Whilst no one was treating me like a patient, I still felt like one. It got to the point where too much was going on and I had difficulty coming to terms with what I perceived as chaos. It was during this time I wanted to get out of the house and become more involved. Being a diligent and industrious worker it felt so wrong sitting at home rehabilitating. It didn't seem right and I objected to feeling like a patient.

I must have perceived it as if I wasn't doing anything for society. All the restrictions with ACC prevented me from earning any money so I volunteered my time, sweeping floors, shifting stock and watering plants at a local garden centre. This was all done early each morning before customers arrived and in exchange they offered me free coffee and something from their cabinet. It was a good compromise, not only did I feel like I was helping out but I was now learning how to work as part of a team again.

I don't recall Christmas but about New years time was when I can remember things again. Prior to this I must have been telling people that I already had a full recollection of events but this simply wasn't true. Truth is, I probably couldn't have told you what I had eaten for breakfast.

My post traumatic amnesia (PTA) lasted about five months. PTA is the period of time in which a person is confused, disoriented and cannot lay down new memories. During this time I had no idea where I was or the day of the week and I even had trouble recognising people. I acted strangely at times and would ask the same questions over and over again. Slowly but gradually I came out of my PTA. Although I passed the Westmead test which cleared me officially of my PTA back in November, it wasn't until New Years that I had a conscious and consistent awareness of what was going on. Even then there were still days where it was patchy which must have been very evident to those around me. Be assured, not every day was a good day.

As we moved into **JANUARY** the biggest obstacle I faced was fatigue. I needed a lot more rest than I used to and I felt like an old grandpa. It was imperative I had an afternoon nap, otherwise I was not a nice person to be around by the time five o'clock rolled round. I took and still require daily rest breaks, I need at least 30 - 45 minutes daily. It's not because I'm being lazy, more the fact that by the time midday rolls around I'm consistently feeling physically drained, mentally fatigued and well I call it, brain weariness but more commonly referred to as psychological exhaustion. Simply, if I miss my afternoon rest breaks I become very tired and difficult to manage. My brain simply can't think, process and organise all that's going on without some downtime. Even currently, if I miss my afternoon sleep you will see an increase in tension, anxiety, irritability and balance issues.

Afternoon naps aside my tiredness quickly developed into insomnia. Sleep deprivation, at a time when my brain just needed the chance to heal almost defeated me. This new situation damn near crippled me, not to mention the toll it took on our recent marriage.

Insomnia was a symptom I had never experienced before, nor was it a condition I wanted to come to terms with. Unfortunately, habitual sleeplessness and insomnia is something I currently have to deal with on a nightly basis. Sleep deprivation and stress was something I had never had trouble with. Before my injury, the moment my head touched the pillow I was gone. No kidding, this was driving me insane or at least a level of depression.

When I awoke at night I knew it was impossible to get back to sleep. So when I wakened I would occasionally go for a short walk to refresh myself in the hope that it would bring on tiredness.

Taking the occasional walk down to Browns Bay quickly developed into a routine. This was not only affecting my sleep but wife's too. Sure, there were nights where I got adequate rest but these were usually followed by sleepless evenings where I would toss and turn consequently affecting Nakita's quality of sleep too. It got to the point where sleeping tablets were ineffective and Nakita had to lock the house and put oil heaters in front of our bedroom door in the hope that she at least would be awoken by my movements.

Eventually, when I awakened at night I was encouraged to wash windows, clean benches, and mop floors. Still, at this time of night I wasn't being supervised so occasionally I would leave the house and go stretch my legs. Over the coming weeks my short walks down to Browns Bay beach extended to well over ten kilometres.

One morning after a few days of little to no sleep it became very evident something had to be done. Nakita awoke in those early hours to find that I had slipped away, yet again. So she called my phone and after a short discussion she worked out I was somewhere in Dairy Flat. How I had managed to walk fifteen kilometres at two o'clock in the morning on a main highway without wearing any reflective clothing beats me.

My committed wife didn't interrogate me too much, she literally picked me up, brought me home and tucked me in again. When I awoke some time later, my argument was: "Come on Love, it was only a walk, I was being safe, my shirt was yellow so that will stand out, I walking opposing the



flow of traffic so cars could see me and I had my cell phone. What's your problem? It was only a walk and I've returned safely ”.

Yes, I know that argument lacks credibility but that is how I was processing things. Also it's important to understand that what was going through my mind was not accurately analysed nor was I acknowledging that there could be consequences from my actions. I now had no excuse for not being aware of what I was doing. Yes, that's true, I had a clear recollection of what I had just done but the way in which I was thinking was now characterised by a lack of logic, basically, my mind was full of senseless and unreasonable ideas.

At this time we were taking a few trips up to the Bay of Islands and down to Tauranga. Long distance travel was not going down very well. I would often try to make it look like I was coping fine but you only needed to scratch the surface to see that it was directly correlated to my behaviour, attitude and emotional disposition. Our travel had to be broken up so at least I could maintain some form of consistency and regularity to my days. Upon arriving at our destination I would just crash and probably not wake till the following morning.

The mental toll it took on me was usually evident the following day and inevitably some form of argument or disagreement would break out between us or I would storm off in a huff. At this time I wanted little or nothing to do with people outside of family or very close friends. If you didn't fit in one of those categories I would either isolate myself, go for a walk or have a rest on my bed. Combine this with the fact I was becoming socially isolated and you can see why I had days where I was not very pleasant to be around.

During **FEBRUARY** I was finally coming to terms with things. It took a long time but I finally accepted the extent of my brain injury. There were three main areas that had been completely erased from my mind. People's names and faces, geographically anything to do with New Zealand and all St John procedures. It was so unfair, how could it be that colleagues I used to work with on a daily basis were now complete strangers, that I could no longer direct my wife from one suburb to another or that after seven years of volunteering for the organisation I had no recollection of any of the jobs I had attended, let alone anything else to do with St John. I disliked it and tried to reject it, but now was the time to accept my limitations, as I have been advised these memories are unlikely to return.

Still I detested the fact that all the people around me were telling me, “you're not the same person we used to know” or “where's the old Chris?” Yes I understand that there must have been things I was doing that I didn't do before my injury but that's because I had developed a foreign way of thinking that even I wasn't familiar with.

My wife had the arduous task of teaching her husband who he used to be. The hardest thing I've ever done came next. The old personality that belonged to the man she remembered marrying was gone and only fragments remained. It was so confusing as I couldn't fully recollect the personality I used to have. Slowly, I revealed to my wife the new person she was married to. There was no way I could fully adopt my old personality. It seemed wrong, it was so unfamiliar and it no longer made any sense.

I was starting to become more aware of my behaviour and the consequences it had on family and friends. Still I found it difficult talking with people I don't frequently associate with, but at least my speech impairments were isolated to an unfamiliar audience. Occasionally I would still speak my mind. If I was angry, frustrated or annoyed they would be accompanied with the appropriate adjectives, however, in these situations it was almost always isolated to my wife or family. I don't make any excuses for it, but at least they understood how my mood affected my emotions.

Most people have a social filter of some description and know when to stop themselves before offending others. I don't know what happened to mine but if someone were to ask, “Do I look fat in

these pants?" My reply would be, yes. Go home, take a jog, focus on taking a few kilograms off your abdomen and measure your body mass index. Next time you come over be sure to wear a dress and it won't exaggerate your figure. Hmmm, yes it may have been the truth but not the most appropriate answer.

Yes, I had good days, but they were accompanied by bad ones too. For some reason it was the bad days I had no recollection of or I can only vaguely recall. For example, I remember making a valentines day booking for a restaurant in the sky tower. It was going to be a complete surprise and a romantic evening. Only, I don't recall what happened but the traffic was bad which got my wife frustrated and consequently I have no recollection of ever going up the sky tower to enjoy a beautiful banquet. By now, I should've had a full recollection of events but for whatever reason it was my bad days I forgot. Not a bad thing actually.

There was a steady increase in my progress over **MARCH**. I no longer needed my physiotherapist as I was now able to resume my usual activities without my endurance or fatigue being affected. My speech impairments more or less resolved but further work was still needed in the areas of recollection and retention. My psychologist was the only one that had an increase in her workload. Simple conversations would occasionally turn into full blown arguments. It didn't matter if you were my wife or someone I didn't know. I was becoming very argumentative. I remember questioning my own mother to the point where she had to just drop the whole conversation before I reached tipping point.

I still had problems with people's names and faces to the point where I was transposing people's names on a regular basis. It got to the point where female ambulance officers were taking on masculine names. Please don't tell me what you thought about this but I do apologise.

Behavioural problems were still evident. I remember one morning I was buying a coffee in Browns Bay when my card got declined. I repeated the transaction but because I was entering the wrong PIN it kept declining, the lady at the counter was doing her best to defuse the situation but I snapped. I was so annoyed at my attempts, I banged the counter, swore at the lady and walked out with my coffee. I had to drink my coffee down at the beach, compose myself again and returned a short while later to rectify my actions and pay for my goods.

Sometimes I'd make my own wife feel small or inadequate just to make it look like I was doing all the household chores. It wouldn't matter if she cooked dinner, hung the wash or was doing something to help out. I would seldom give her any credit for her work. Obviously, these were areas that still required a bit of work. The good thing was I could now recognise my shortcomings and identify the areas that needed some attention. It opened my awareness which gave me the opportunity to focus on all these areas which now no longer pose an issue.

In the evenings our landlord and my wife would watch a few programs on TV. I on the other hand could no longer tolerate the flickering glare, changes in light let alone the noise. It was simply too much to comprehend and make sense of. Instead I would remove myself from the room, clean the kitchen, load the dishwasher or bake some cookies. So guess we must of had a reasonably tidy house.

**APRIL** dawned and I had a strong desire to return back to work. I had to learn not to push the system and accept there was a process that had to be followed. There was a lot of new changes to come to terms with thanks to our new CEO, but changes that needed to happen long ago. It was interesting, I often thought a new ambulance service had taken over. Not only did we have new guidelines to follow and drugs we could administer but our CEO had conveniently changed the colour and markings of our ambulances and issued new uniforms. It simply wasn't the same ambulance service I remembered working for.

I took baby steps at first. I needed to come to terms with our new procedures we were operating under. It was important to retain all this new information as my job depended on it. I attended my compulsory training, (CCE) for my volunteer role. I started with short two hour sessions and slowly I increased it to full day sessions. I had come a long way since my injury and it was imperative not to overwork myself now.



I understand that my injury stole my opportunity of attaining Authority to

Practice (ATP) at EMT level. I'm also aware that I have lost almost all my medical knowledge to the point where I struggled to read a lot of the medical terminology contained in our procedures. But don't underestimate me, this is still a career I really appreciate and a field I thoroughly enjoy. It's not something I'm going to let my injury steal from me, I love my job more than that.

If you want to see my determined side then stick something in front of me and tell me it's out of my league. Still, I'm not going to put my uniform on and become a "wanna be paramedic" that acts like he knows everything. No, I'm a First Responder and I'm already back attending events again. I need to start small, restore my confidence and reestablish my medical knowledge.

I will eventually look at returning to repeat my EMT course. But that can wait until I'm in a better position to retain all the new information their teaching. For me it's a slow process, but it's not something I think anyone should rush. It will take me a while, probably longer than before but I'm going back to work in a job that will build a brilliant foundation and help ground my medical knowledge.

Yes, those three areas I have problems in still exist but stick a challenge in front of me and it only makes me stronger. Yes I still get confused with names and faces and that will only continue as I head back to work. I've only got one map book I've used to improve my geography and it now has worn pages. Hang, if you saw the vast pile of cue cards I've created, about our new procedures, you'd probably be jealous.

Work aside, I have made so much progress. If you had seen me 10 months earlier you'd understand how far I'd come. I had gone from being unresponsive in a coma, progressing into someone who was agitated and confused, still I continued to advance into the intelligent and motivated person I am today.

The last 10 months had been a horrendous nightmare, filled with heartbreak and anguish. My wife Nakita has gone through hell and back. As in every marriage, it was time to spend some quality time together and work on our relationship. It had been a little more than a year since our wedding and we had already had two attempts to get our honeymoon in. Our second attempt lasting less than 24 hours before I put a disappointing end to it and got helicoptered off the mountain. A change was needed, so me made a move for warmer climates. Third time lucky, we skipped the country and took our honeymoon in Rarotonga.

It was a fitting conclusion. The perfect opportunity to relax, unwind and reflect on the journey my injury and our relationship had taken us on. I wasn't how either of us envisaged our first year of marriage. Reflecting back their was one thing I had been assured of. It takes a faithful, loving and loyal companion to walk by your side to get you through our ordeal. What we'd gone through destroys a lot of marriages. But together we knew, if our marriage can survive this, then bring on

the rest of lives challenges. The last ten months has just strengthened and reaffirmed our need for each other.

Sure we've had our ups and downs. In fact we have faced challenges most haven't dreamed of. Every step of the way Nakita has been there to support me. Her unwavering dedication, steadfast loyalty has made me complete. Thank you darling for being who you are, for sharing these last ten months with me. I know I've put you through an agonising journey my love, but, together, we've made a life-changing decision. We chose each other.....