

Shaner/ 'Lessons from a Life Almost Lost'

Continued from Page 1D

above the ankle. The doctors came to see me in ICU the next afternoon after I had come to.

Once I was stabilized, they told me because of the damage to my spine there was a 99 percent chance I'd never walk again. To me that was something that was so foreign, so unknown, it was a difficult piece of news to take.

Q: In fact, you didn't believe it.

A: I've always been a person that I've been blessed with what the outside world would call stubbornness. I always prefer to think of it as persistence — I was lying in the hospital bed when (the doctor) said, "I don't think you'll ever walk again, but when I look in your eyes, you look like you're going to try to prove me wrong."

Q: How long did it take you to prove him wrong?

A: About six to seven weeks later. I had gotten transferred to Magee Rehab in Philadelphia. Every day, from the day of the accident, once I became coherent, the first thing I did when I'd wake up in the morning, I would pull the sheets off my feet. I would try to focus on my feet and get them to move and it never happened. Every day I would do that the first thing as soon as I woke up.

(One day) I pulled the sheets off my feet and focused on my feet and all of a sudden I saw the little toe on my right foot move ever

so slightly. A couple days later, I was able to get the little toe on my left foot to move.

Q: There are many, many people who experienced the same thing you did and never do walk. So why are you different?

A: I still ask that question once in a while. I've spent the last 20 years of my experience trying to figure out what the meaning of life is. I had a near-death experience when the building collapsed on me. A week and a half later, God spoke to me in the hospital. I never broke down emotionally before like I had that night in the hospital and just begged for a chance to walk again. In my experience, God spoke to me and told me I was going to get better. Five to six weeks later, I'm able to walk out of the hospital. There's something more than life being a series of random events.

Q: So you've spent a lot of time since then just trying to make sense of what happened to you.

A: Sometimes stuff happens. It's the old adage, 'It's not just what happens to you; it's what you do about it.' I've come to believe through personal experience that we have a say in the outcome, depending on how we think about things and what we focus our thoughts about. Why I was able to get up and walk away from that hospital bed, I don't have an answer for you for 100 percent. But there's a lot of things I've learned about life, that as I

look back on it, that was a blessing to me.

Q: The accident was a blessing to you?

A: Yes. I've talked to therapists who have said that many people who have traumatic life experiences ultimately look back on them as some sort of blessing. I look at life in a different way now.

Q: How do you live now?

A: I live in the moment. There's nothing I can do about what happened yesterday and I don't know what may or may not happen tomorrow. My objective is to stay focused on my goals down the road, but I can't put all my eggs in that basket. It's all about living in the moment and doing the best you can today.

Q: How are you feeling today, physically?

A: If you were seeing me face-to-face, you would never know that I had ever been injured. One of the reasons I came to Florida was that the cold weather was really starting to have an effect, more so on the arthritis in my ankle. There are days when I wake up when I feel like I'm an 80-year-old man. I don't dwell on that stuff. I dwell on the positive, so I work on inner pain management.

Life's good. I never had a bad day. I've had some awfully bad moments, but never a bad day.

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