

A LOVE FOR LIFE

By Derrick Ard

Everyone at some point in time has had something happen to them that changed their life. For me, it not only changed my life, it changed the way I looked at things. March 28, 1997 is a day I'll never forget. I was hunting.

When the gun went off it startled me—then I realized I was bleeding. It's strange how I never felt the impact, but when I saw my own blood pouring from my body as if someone had turned on a faucet, I began to feel faint and dizzy. I soon realized that this was a fatal wound and I was surely doomed; I passed out.

The impact with the ground awoke me to an overwhelming fear; I was dying and no one knew where I was. I was alone and would die alone. I began to think about my family, and with those thoughts in my head I forced myself to get up and go for help. If I was going to die, it was not going to be there, like that.

When I finally made it to a nearby highway about a hundred yards away, I managed to flag down a passing car. When the couple approached me and started rendering first aid, I felt relieved that at least I would not die alone. I asked them to tell my family that I loved them and would miss them dearly.

My rescuers immediately rendered first aid and applied pressure to my severed femoral artery. The blast from the 12 gauge shot gun hit me in the upper thigh area near the groin. The wound was massive and the bleeding, as you can imagine, was sever. I could actually feel my own blood pressure dropping.

When the first ambulance arrived they had trouble getting an IV started. I was told that my arteries were collapsing due to the rapid blood loss. By a miracle a passing motorist, who just happened to be trauma center RN, stopped to see if she could help. She was able to get the IV started. During that time, I remember that as my blood pressure dropped, I began to lose my vision. It was like looking down a tunnel and the walls were closing in, until nothing, total blindness. Now I was cold, blind, and thought that it wouldn't be long now until I would die. With in seconds of starting the IV, the tunnel opened back up and slowly my vision came back. To this day, I do not know who that RN was. The local Sheriff's Office also had no luck on finding my savior. I know she is out there somewhere and she will never be forgotten.

I remained there beside the highway over an hour before Life Flight came with a helicopter. The flight to the hospital seemed like a lifetime, but only took 35 minutes. I don't remember the flight in great detail, but I do remember that I quit breathing. The paramedics worked frantically to put a breathing tube down my throat, which was very uncomfortable and I seemed to fight it the whole time. By the time we arrived at the hospital, I had stopped breathing again.

I can remember all the nurses and doctors all around me while they assessed the situation. I know they were asking me lots of questions, but I can't remember what. All I know is that my adrenaline had finally worn off and I was in a great deal of pain. I never knew you could hurt that much. At the time I was wishing for a quick death so the pain would stop. The only thing I wanted was for them to hurry up and take me to surgery, because I knew they would put me to sleep and I wouldn't feel anything.

The last thing I remember was the elevator ride to the operating room. The doctors told me later that I actually bled to death on the table. They had to jump start me a couple of times during surgery. Somehow, either by help of a Higher Power or sheer luck, they were able to pump enough blood back into me and restart my heart. I not only had an injury to my leg, but the pellets traveled up to my abdomen and caused some serious problems there as well. I came millimeters from losing a kidney. Due to the extent of the injury and the lack of blood, all the doctors could do was try to stop as much bleeding as they could, stick me in ICU and wait.

They told my wife that I would most likely not survive the night. The wound was too severe and I had lost too much blood. Everyone was so sure that I would not survive that my Father-in-law actually started digging my grave. I was to be buried in a private cemetery. The doctors told my wife the same thing the next night. This went on for nearly 72 hours. I feel for my wife and family for having to deal with this. It was especially hard on my wife. To be told that your spouse would die and there was nothing to be done.

On the third night I surprised them all; I survived.

When I awoke on the third night, I overheard the doctors say that I would lose my entire right leg. At first I was in shock and disbelief, but then I realized that I was alive. To me, losing my leg was a fair price to pay to survive. I knew that somehow I would manage without it. I knew that I would still be able to be with my wife and daughter, and that was all that mattered.

I remember my family coming into my room on that night (or day, don't know what time it was) thankful for me being alive yet sad that I would lose my leg. I couldn't talk due to the breathing tube down my throat, but I let them know that I would be alright.

Waking up was just the beginning. I would undergo several surgeries, from three amputee surgeries to exploratory surgery to my abdomen to make sure nothing else was badly damaged. After they amputated my leg, I was in unbelievable pain. Fortunately they have a drug called morphine. It is a wonderful drug and will stop any pain, but there is a bad side effect. When given in large doses it causes you to hallucinate. You can't distinguish between what is real and what is not. Hallucinations and reality coexist. To me this was more frightening than dying. You begin to lose your sanity. I spent three weeks in ICU experiencing these hallucinations. It was an experience I don't wish on anyone. Most of it was horrible nightmares, from dying to losing my wife and family and anything else the mind can imagine. Some of it was pretty funny after looking back. Like the time there was a horse in my room and I thought I was taken to a Veterinary clinic. Each Day my room seemed to look different to the point that I thought they moved me every night. My wife assured me that they had not.

When they finally moved me to a private room and took me off morphine, it was a great relief. My family was able to visit me more and adjust to my condition. I let them know that I was OK with the fact that I lost my leg and that they should be, too. The first time my youngest sister came to visit me in ICU; she came into the room crying. I wrote on a piece of paper, (you cannot talk when there are tubes down your throat) "Don't cry little sister, I can still fish." They all knew then that I would be all right. I still have that piece of paper and it serves as an inspiration for my family and me. I was bound and determined to recover and get back to home and do the things I love to do, so determined in fact, that I was released one month earlier than doctors expected with my type of injury.

After two full months in the hospital, it was time to go home. It was a day I often dreamed about. It was strange at first; it felt as if I had been away for years. Everything looked and felt different. At least my dog still recognized me.

The first thing I did when I got home was to plan a fishing trip to my father-in-law's pond. It was easy to get to and easy to fish from a wheelchair. We caught a lot of fish that day and after that I knew that everything would be OK and that life would go on. I was on the road to recovery and would keep moving forward.

It has been two years since that tragic day, and a lot has happened. This past August I moved to Eldorado to make a new start in life. I am currently attending Howard College in San Angelo. I am determined to get a degree and return to work so I can provide a better living for my family.

Incredibly, the accident and the loss of my leg has been a blessing. It has given me a better outlook on life and strengthened my family. We now know that we can accomplish anything in life. It has made me a better husband, a better father and a better person over all. It has opened my eyes so that I see everything in a different perspective. As the song goes, "I once was blind, but now I see." Now I can see the beauty in almost anything, and I often stop to "smell the roses."

I am often complimented on my attitude and how I deal with my handicap. It hasn't been easy these past two years, but I know that I have to look at the things I do have, not at the things I don't. I still have my family, and I still do the things I enjoy doing. I once heard a young lady say, "It's not the people with disabilities that are handicapped, it's those without."

If I might offer some advice, I would tell you to treat all of your loved ones as if it were your last day on earth—it may very well be. Life is not to be wasted. You may not get a second chance as I did.

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The After Shock
By Derrick Ard

Wow! It's been nearly five years since I wrote that report. I did end up with a B+ on that paper and a B overall in the class. I graduated in December of 2000, with a 3.9gpa. I was on the National Dean's List for two years, and was awarded the Presidents award for 'Student of the Year' in 2000-2001. I was also the first student to be *nominated* for the "All USA Academic Team" and was the first to be *named* to the "All State Academic Team" in 2001 for Howard College, San Angelo Campus. I think my parents are still in shock, since they could not make me study in high school, and I was thrilled with a C-. I received my Associates of Applied Science in Computer Maintenance and Networking with honors. I went on to receive my 'A+ Certification' for computers, being the First Student at the San Angelo Campus to do so and my CCNA and CCDA (Cisco Certified Network/Design Associate) certifications. All certifications were received by the beginning of 2001. I do have other certifications, but these are the most important.

I am still married to the same wonderful woman, and my daughter is finishing up the third grade, she made the A B honor roll. She is now 9 years old. We now live in Junction Texas, where I work for Texas Tech University, as the Information Systems Specialist and the IT Manager for the Hill Country Campuses. I started work, on July 15, 2001, and moved the family here on October 15, 2001. It is the first paying job I've had since losing my leg in '97, and it felt GOOD!!! The Hill Country Campuses consist of Junction (My office and main responsibility), Fredericksburg, and Marble Falls (known as Highland Lakes). The Junction campus is where I started. When I came to work here, the other two campuses were just a thought. I set up all the lab configurations, ordered and set up all the computers, and did the original network layout design, after which we hired technicians to maintain the sites. I maintained the Junction campus and act as the IT manager for all three sites.

I don't think I could have found a better town to work and raise a family and grow old in, than Junction Campus. The people here are some of the kindest hearted people I have ever met, and I've been to a few places. The place I work is the most relaxing environment you could ever ask for. Texas Tech University Center in Junction is located on over 400 acres, nestled on the beautiful South Llano River. I have met the best and most influential people of my life at this Campus. On countless occasions, I have sat in my office and watch herds of whitetail just outside my window. I don't think I could ever work anyplace else.

Since living here in Junction, I have become very active in the Community. I joined the 'Junction Rotary Club' sometime around October or November of 2001. It is in District 5840, and the club number is 1905. I was elected treasurer in July of 2002, and just recently re-elected to a third term this year.

In September of 2002, I helped establish the 'Kimble Hospital Foundation', in which I serve as the founding Treasurer. It is an organization that was founded to help raise funds in support of our local hospital. It is still in its infancy, but good things are expected. We are currently working on building an Assisted Living Facility here in Junction on some land that was donated to the foundation. I was elected to be the Project Director for the development of the facility.

In February of 2003, I joined the Junction Volunteer Fire Department. I am very proud and honored to be an active member of this department. This department is very well trained and equipped, and the members are very professional when it comes to their duty. Junction VFD covers one of the largest areas for a single department in the State of Texas. I hope to become Basic Certified in a couple of years. Just recently I became a certified scuba diver with the department.

My biggest accomplishment in the community was being elected to the Junction Independent School Board of Trustees this year (2004). My term runs until 2007. I did run for the position last year (2003) but was narrowly defeated by only 19 votes. It did give me a boost of confidence considering I have lived here less than three years. I am very honored to be trusted into a very important position and will do my job honestly and fairly.

There are a lot of little things that I have accomplished, but I don't want to get long winded, so I'll end here. As you can see, I don't let my disability stand in my way; I just find ways around it. Yea, I know there are things that I can never do again, but that's ok, because there are still plenty things I can do.

I often look back and wonder if all this would have happened if I had not had that terrible accident back in '97 (Probably not). At least I don't think so. You see, that day changed the way I approach things in life. Most people are afraid to take giant leaps or take chances. They are content on keeping things the way they are. I knew that I had to change in order to cope with my disability and was willing to do so. I don't regret any of it, not even losing my leg. Looking back, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Could I have been better off if none of it ever happened? Sure it could have, but you are not supposed to think in terms of 'What if'. We need to think of 'What Is' and 'What Can Be'. (by Derrick Ard, September 2004)