



Paul and Lorraine Hebert

The day the lights went out

A lineman's electrocution leads to a powerful life lesson

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**SATURDAY, SEPT. 30, 1989
FAHLER, NORTHERN ALBERTA**

IT WAS COLD AND MISERABLE OUT THERE. The freak September snowstorm had dumped at least six inches overnight and Paul, an experienced lineman, figured he'd have to work again. So much for his day off. As if on cue, the phone rang. "Yeah, OK," he mumbled into the receiver before hanging up. He was tired of all the overtime, working one weekend after another. Pulling on his outdoor gear, he made a silent vow to steal away with Lorraine the next weekend. He'd wrap up this Saturday shift and then he and his bride would take off on a trip to celebrate their recent marriage...

As 14,000 volts of power surged through the line, Paul knew he was a dead man. Standing in the open field, gripping the high voltage cable, he had enough time to marvel at "how it could end so quick" in the split second before the electricity slammed through his body, forcing every muscle to

contract in a single violent Herculean squeeze. The powerful jolt hurled the lineman 20 feet through the cold September air like a feather in the wind. With a sickening thud, he landed on his back in the thick mud lining the ditch alongside the empty northern Alberta highway.

MCLENNAN HOSPITAL: ONE HOUR LATER

Lorraine, a petite but feisty blue-eyed French Canadian, burst into the hospital emergency room, searching for her husband Paul. Bracing for the worst, she was relieved to find him in a small room alert and in pain, but otherwise looking fine. The only apparent injuries were a little hole in his ring finger and a burn on his wrist where his watch had been.

Lorraine, 36, and Paul, 40, had been married exactly one week. He tried to tell her how much he loved her and where to access his finances and investments, but the agony was unstoppable—no amount of morphine could touch it. He was burning on the inside and they were helpless to stop it. The electrical current that coursed through his body had created a thermal burn that was literally boiling his blood. “All I could do was scream,” he shivers at the memory. His skin was so hot to the touch, the emergency room staff had to wear rubber gloves. The doctor in charge took Lorraine aside. “We’ll try to save everything we can, but it doesn’t look good.” She looked into the doctor’s eyes and knew he was telling the truth. “It was like a dream. All I could think was ‘this can’t be happening,’” she says.

16 YEARS LATER

Paul is only now able to speak openly about the torment of the months and years following the electrocution. He remembers waking up in the burn unit at the University of Alberta hospital in Edmonton and being told his left foot and some fingers were gone. “What do you mean my foot’s gone?” he asked in horror. A short time later, he remembers begging them not to take his right hand. Hallucinations were a sign that another part of his body was gangrenous and would have to be amputated. Like a grotesque Stephen King novel, Paul continued to lose parts of his body over several weeks.

Both legs are now gone along with most of his right arm and several fingers on his left hand. The man who once lived to heli-ski, golf and climb poles fixing power lines has endured split stumps, open sores, a heart attack, several emotional breakdowns and now, due primarily to the prolonged thermal burning, severe osteoporosis. Yet, his spirit remains intact. Lorraine never left his side and she’s as lively and strong as ever.

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—Lorraine Hebert

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—Paul Hebert

“I don't like a pity party. If something happens, I'll say 'well, let's find a way,'” she says, a hint of a French accent framing her words. She found a way to bring him home and care for him and restore his confidence, refusing to baby him. When someone suggested they install wing handles on the doors, she shook her head saying, “No, you need to learn to live in the real world, and most doors in the real world don't have wing handles.”

There have been days and weeks when Paul steeped in self-pity. But then a group of children gave him the gift of gratitude. One day Paul detoured through Edmonton's Cross Cancer Institute on his way to rehab when a group of cancer-stricken children, many of who were bald from treatment, swarmed around him. Laughing and giggling, they asked for a closer look at his hard metal hook.

“These kids made me see I'm pretty lucky. We're not here forever so how we live this thing called life is pretty important. I don't need a million dollars—life itself is the most important thing.”

Would your company
benefit by a personal
visit from Paul?

Paul Hebert and his wife Lorraine recently began speaking publicly about their ordeal. If you would like to book a personal presentation, call Paul directly on his cell phone at 780-719-7775 or e-mail him at pheb@telus.net.