

Orangeville Banner

Tuesday August 5, 1986

Innocent horseplay altered Orangeville resident's life

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The simplest things in life are no longer so easy for Rob Hill of Orangeville.

His head is outfitted in a steel halo and he wears a medical vest. Four screws have been drilled into his skull to hold the halo or metal headband in place.

That contraption is to prevent further damage to his spinal cord and keep his broken neck in place.

Rob faces an uncertain future as a quadriplegic, however there are some certainties for Rob. But as he said in a telephone-interview Thursday he's working on a "slow build-up each day."

He's determined to live a normal life. Prior to July 12 he was doing just that.

Rob has finished three years at Wilfrid Laurier University with one more to go, in business administration.

A graduate Orangeville District Secondary School, Rob worked at Canadian Tire in Orangeville for three years before entering university. And this summer he was enjoying a summer job managing a student painting business with friends in Mississauga.

It took only a second of time at a cottage near Bracebridge, to turn his life around, leaving him permanently paralyzed below the-chest.

Rob recalls the day well. He and a few friends were sitting on a dock at a point where the water was three to four feet deep. He decided to push one of his friends in and the friend took him along too – something that he expected to happen when he initiated the horseplay.

"We both went in at the same time." Rob's head hit bottom and he had no sensation. "I felt my neck go. I knew what had happened. I was resigned to the fact. I tend to be pretty pragmatic. I knew what I had done was pretty serious. I knew I might not walk again."

He couldn't push himself off the sandy lake bottom and he was feeling cold and some pain in his neck. Three friends with him

were former lifeguards and they got him out of the water and performed first aid.

He was taken to hospital in Bracebridge, then to Gravenhurst by ambulance, and then by small aircraft to Buttonville airport and onto Sunnybrook Medical Centre by ambulance again.

The first set of x-rays were taken in Bracebridge and, Rob remembers asking the doctor if he'd be able to use his legs. The doctor told him the damage was severe. The trauma team at Sunnybrook confirmed the worst.

"I had prepared myself mentally," Rob says. "I am really thankful it was me and not the guy I tried to push in. I'd have a hard time living with that."



SO INNOCENT

"It was a freak accident, It just happened. There's no blame to be placed on anyone except for myself.

I knew the rules about diving into shallow water, but you never think about pushing people in: Everyone knows not to dive into shallow water but I've pushed people in and been pushed in hundreds of times. It seems so innocent."

Rob wants to tell his story in the hope of preventing others, even one person, from making the same innocent, yet serious mistake. "I want to make people aware."

His friends have helped to pull him through the first weeks. A lot of people have come to visit him in Toronto. "It really makes the days better." He says he damaged a lot of nerve fibers. The first night in Sunnybrook he remembers the doctors trying to determine how much strength he had in his arms. "They lifted my right hand above my head and I couldn't hold it. It hit me in the face."

He's lost 25 pounds in three weeks but his spirits remain high. Steely determination is a phrase that aptly applies to Rob.

MINI GOALS

"I've set mini goals." He's working on building up the strength in his arms on a daily basis. Last week he had his first shower since the accident – something he felt pretty happy about. And he's elated that he can now brush his teeth and he's starting to feed himself. Another mini goal is to get rid of a motorized wheelchair and into one where he can build up his arm muscles even more. But he says the electric wheelchair is pretty good in that it provides him with a lot of mobility.

While Rob has gone through a tremendous ordeal, it's also been difficult on his family - Fred and Barb Hill of Orangeville and their other three children.

"The doctor called from Bracebridge," Fred says. "I was thunderstruck. My mind went blank and I said I'd call her back but she said she'd call me back and she did about 45 minutes later." The Hills are very glad they were still home for they had planned to leave on vacation earlier that day, but hadn't gotten away yet.

They're maintaining a positive attitude although they admit they took it hard. "His right hand is stronger than his left and the doctor says he can strengthen that and who's to say he won't get more. He's a very positive person. He's determined, he always has been."

Fred says his son hasn't lost his sense of humor. He says they all know what's happened and they're ready to move onto the next step. Fred's already made Rob promise that he'll get out of university before he retires. "He will get his strength back in his arms and he will be independent."

That, of course, depends on how well he responds to treatment but his parents say it's something he's working very hard at.

Fred and Barb are impressed with Sunnybrook, adding that the center even has a program to help the family through crises. "They took a lot of time explaining everything to us."

They stayed at an adjacent hostel for the first week and have been down to Toronto on an almost daily basis. "They will get the most potential out of him,"

Barb says. "It could've been worse than it is. I thank our friends and the support they have given all of us."

Both say they still have trouble sleeping. "I find the lack of sleep is the worst thing," Fred says. "I can't stop thinking of it."

BACK TO SCHOOL

Rob was transferred to the Lyndhurst convalescent home last week to further improve his self-care skills. The doctors say he could be there for three or four months but Rob has set his own goal.

"I hope to be-out of here by January or I'm going to be upset with myself."

And he's got back-to-school plans for January. He's already had his friends register him to start back then, with the aim of finishing up his degree in December of 1987.

After that he's not sure what he'll do, adding that his options are open. But he says he's leaning towards finance.

Whatever he decides on, his humor and determination will get him through.

"Golf's going to be tough," he quips. "Skydiving's going to be tough, but going out for a few beers will be no problem." Rob has set goals for himself and he's determined to meet them. His friends shouldn't be surprised to see him back in the classroom next year.