



### **“No big deal”**

Waterloo student Rob Hill, Paralyzed in a 1986 accident, is determined to focus on what he can achieve, not what he cannot manage.

## **Paralyzed last year, WLU student won't go through life 'sitting down**

Rob Hill makes it seem easy.

But there are moments when the reality of being a quadriplegic breaks through the friendly, joking manner of the 26-year-old Wilfrid Laurier University student.

There are times when tasks once done without thinking require painstaking hours of planning. Others are simply impossible.

But for Hill, the moments of embarrassment and frustration are rare. Since being paralyzed in a swimming accident last July, Hill has refused to dwell on what he cannot do.

He thinks only of what he can, and will, accomplish.

“I want to lead my life as if I weren't disabled,” he said, smiling. “I just go through life sitting down. My legs don't work, but that's no big deal. I've still got my brain.”

It took just one careless instant last summer to change Hill's life as a typical student.

At a friend's cottage near Bracebridge, Hill jokingly tried to push someone off a dock into the chilly, three-foot water. Pulled into the water himself, he struck his head on the sandy lake bottom.

The impact caused the sixth vertebra in his neck to “pop out,” damaging his spinal cord.

Most of Hill's body is paralyzed. He will never walk again and he has only partial function in both arms.

His left hand is essentially useless while he has retained 10% use of his right hand. Hill is thankful that he has enough power in his arms to use a manual wheelchair.

Despite being categorized as a quadriplegic because all four limbs were affected, Hill's goal is to live independently.

“I accepted (paralysis) in the water,” he said matter-of-factly during an interview at a specially designed apartment for the disabled in Waterloo.

Following the accident, Hill was taken to Toronto's Sunnybrook Medical Centre where he was fitted with a metal "halo," supported by four screws drilled into his skull, which held his neck in place as it healed.

When it was removed, he didn't have the strength to hold up his head or keep it from rolling from side to side.

Quietly determined, he has undergone intensive physiotherapy and occupational therapy at the Lyndhurst rehabilitation center in Toronto. Managing to brush his teeth, feed, wash and dress himself, and finally to transfer himself to and from a wheelchair have been major victories.

He has resumed his university business courses and wheels himself to and from class each day.

He hopes to get a modified van soon and plans to graduate with part of his original class this summer.

Some things haven't changed. Hill still sports a diamond stud in his left ear lobe and he still likes beer.

He makes paralysis seem to be just another learning experience, another challenge to overcome.

"I think of myself as disabled when I'm rolling to school and I hit a curb I can't go up. And I have to go back a block and I hit another curb."

His friends and the professionals who helped during his recovery use the words "amazing" and "incredible" to describe his acceptance of life in a wheelchair, and his determination to succeed in spite of it.

"Anger, depression and denial are common reactions to spinal cord injuries," said Brenda Skelly, a social worker at Lyndhurst where Hill lived from August until March.

But, for Hill there was mainly calm acceptance that although his physical life would be different, the quality would be the same.

"He's a very impressive young man," she said. "I think he had a very strong belief in himself, and an ability to overcome limitations.

Skelly added she saw some moments of frustration in the seemingly unbreakable determination.

"He does tend to make it look easy, to present to the world that it isn't so tough being a quadriplegic," she said. "In actuality it is."

One friend, Mark Moses said, "I always wondered whether everything was really OK ... How could he accept it so easily? I couldn't have."

Moses admitted that sometimes he felt sorry for his friend, especially when simple tasks like getting the mail are impossible because the box is too high.

"It really bothered me," Moses said. "It's not fair. Why can't he get into the mailbox?"

Skelly said Hill was concerned during his recovery that people would treat him differently because of his disability.

And it happens.

Hill said some friends have drifted away. Others, he added, make a conscious effort to include him in all of their activities, and overcompensate the other way."

There are moments of struggle when physical barriers, like curbs, get in his way. In a restaurant, he must ask others to cut his meat.

"It's not frustrating," he said. "It's embarrassing."

Nearly six feet tall, Hill has lost about 25 pounds since the accident last July. The muscles of his legs have deteriorated and appear long thin in his pants.

His daily routine now consists of taking several different medications, carefully controlling his bodily functions and planning meals and dressing with meticulous care.

Such things as bladder infections have become a way of life.

His upper body has grown strong from therapy.

Caroline Kopytek, Hill's, girlfriend since before the accident, said his easy going personality is unchanged I don't understand how he can say: 'No, it's not worth bothering about; it's not worth getting upset about',” she said “He doesn't get upset about anything.”

She called him “funny and very clever, and bright . . . but he likes WWF (World Wrestling Federation) too much.”

Kopytek said there is only one difference in their relationship, since the accident: now Hill takes nearly as long to get ready as she does.

The first time he dressed himself · after the accident, it took an hour to put on underwear, pants, shoes and socks. He can now do the task in 10 minutes.

“I insist on doing everything myself, if can do it,” he said.

Still interested in the entrepreneurial side of business, Hill hopes to find work using the managerial skills he developed working for Triple A Student Painters before the accident.