

Sharing a Lifetime of Experience – Marie Plumb

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Marie Plumb was 20 years old and had been married to her high school sweetheart for just two months when she and her new husband decided to drive to Toronto from North Bay to choose their first ever home together.

It was 1958 and Ontario was in the midst of a heatwave. Marie's husband had borrowed his Dad's car and the pair was excitedly embarking upon the next stage of their life together.

As a student nurse, Marie had been working long hours and was sleeping in the passenger seat when she awoke with a start to find the car hurtling down a ravine. Her husband had passed out at the wheel as a result of the intense heat.

Marie, now 80 years old, remembers: "It was terrifying. I knew immediately that I had sustained a very serious injury. I had a complete absence of feeling."

The hospital in Barrie was not able to accommodate patients with a spinal cord injury at the time, so Marie was separated from her husband and taken to Toronto. She explains: "My husband had broken his leg and I had sustained a spinal cord injury, meaning I had no feeling or movement from the waist down. My first few days in hospital were a blur as I was so heavily sedated.

"Once I came round and had a full understanding of my injury, my background in nursing gave me a small idea of what to expect. My husband was just 19 years old, I was 20. We were so young. So I made the heartbreaking decision to ask him for a divorce. But he refused to leave my side. To him, I was still Marie."

Marie threw herself into the recovery process: "The first thing you have to tackle post injury is how you feel mentally and emotionally, that's the hardest part. You have a lot of time to think in rehab and it's easy to fall into a dark place when considering what life might be like."

Near the end of her rehabilitation, Marie discovered she was pregnant: “The doctors had never experienced this situation before, a person who was newly injured and also, pregnant. It was challenging but having the baby to focus on gave me new meaning and something to distract me from dark thoughts.”

Attitudes towards people with a disability in the 60s were starkly different to what they are today, Marie explains: “If you sustained a spinal cord injury you were expected to stay away from the public eye, behind closed doors. It was a very hard situation. When I was out and about, people would stare or make comments. Most people thought that they could become infected with something if they came near you, so generally I’d catch them staring and then they’d blush and run away. In the months that immediately followed my injury, I learned that I had a strength in me that was more powerful than anything I’d felt before.

“I would go for jobs as a medical secretary and employers would question how on earth I’d be able to fulfill the tasks set to me. They’d take one look at me and say ‘Oh, you’re in a wheelchair, we don’t have room for you.’”

By the time she was 40 years old, Marie had separated from her husband and moved to Toronto by herself, returning to school to brush up on medical terminology. It was at this time that she discovered Peer Support volunteering with Spinal Cord Injury Ontario (which, at the time, was known as the Canadian Paraplegic Association).

“When I was injured there was nothing like Peer Support. There was no one that could wheel into my room, answer my questions and show me how normal my life could be. If I had access to Peer Support back then my life would have been much easier. It was all just trial and error for me.”

Marie still volunteers as a Peer Support mentor for SCIO to this day: “You’re talking to people who have been told that they’ll never walk again. I want to be there for them because I had no one there for me. I’ve wanted to do something that involved helping others ever since I was a little girl; this is my way of doing that.

“My spinal cord injury has taught me that I am a far stronger person than I ever realized. Plan your life, then consider the wheelchair, don’t ever let it hold you back from living your dreams.”

Today, Marie believes she may well be the oldest woman with paraplegia in Ontario. She loves reading, visits friends often and ventures across the city to meet and support people who are newly injured.

After more than five decades of living with a spinal cord injury, it's safe to say that anyone who gets support from Marie will get the most comprehensive and honest explanation of what a great life you can live with an SCI, and we love her for it.