

Better: Journey through quadriplegia

Daniel Curtis, food enthusiast and long-time Austinite, fights to emerge from his struggle with quadriplegia on two feet.

Daniel Curtis couldn't move, let alone sleep. All he could do was try to ignore the agonizing itch under his nose as he laid in patient rehab, consumed by the itch and two triceps that couldn't move to scratch it.

Seventeen months ago, Curtis' life changed when he slipped from his diving board and shattered his sixth vertebrae, paralyzing both of his arms and legs and leaving him a quadriplegic.

Before his injury, the thought never occurred to Curtis that one day he could be in a wheelchair. Born in London, England, Curtis moved to Austin when he was one, where he has lived for the majority of his life since.

It was when he dropped out of Austin Community College to focus on his full-time job at Katz's Deli that he discovered his passion for the food and beverage industry. He decided to pursue this passion beyond the deli and eventually began working at the AT&T Conference Center in Austin, where his friend was the executive chef.

"The best thing I ever did was check the long-term disability box," reflected Curtis on his time at AT&T. He paused for a moment before admitting, "I don't know why I did it, but I did."

Since the jump that sent Curtis diving headfirst into a world that he had never expected for himself, he has regained the use of his arms and, to a certain extent, hands. Though he has yet to be able to feel pain in his legs, he can feel even the softest sensation. He is expected to walk again.

These achievements and hopes were never guaranteed to Curtis, and he fought for them, often against his own cynicism and despondency.

Curtis looked down at his hands with a raised brow, considering what his greatest frustrations have been since paralysis.

“Hands, hands, hands... that would be the first six answers,” he finally murmured. “I can probably hold on to a hammer, but give me a nail and I’d probably fuck myself up.”

While he has seen improvement in his limbs and both his strength and range of motion, the recovery process has been a slow one. “If you just break a bone, it’s six weeks. Break the bone I broke – it could be a lifetime,” said Curtis.

And that’s without the setbacks that he has faced. Not long into his recovery, Curtis suffered from heterotopic ossification, a condition in which bone begins to grow in soft tissues after the body has experienced trauma.

“I was doing really well, when all of a sudden, I started losing function,” recalled Curtis, scooting his wheelchair back and forth impatiently. “I couldn’t move my right leg; I was sweating all the time; I was having spasms out of my chair.”

Many, many MRIs later, Curtis still didn’t know what was wrong. It wasn’t until numerous trips to the doctor and attempts to self-diagnose that he was able to link the physical torment to heterotopic ossification, which he likely obtained after stretching past his body’s safe threshold, a result of his inability to feel pain in his legs.

Not all of Curtis’ pain was physical. Before his injury, he was ready to begin ring shopping for his live-in girlfriend. But his new needs and limitations were more than she had bargained for, and the relationship suffered beyond recovery.

“The way she looked at me before, and the way she looked at me after... it was frustrating,” remembered Curtis, his eyes set somewhere only he could see.

Curtis was overwhelmed by frustration and a feeling of helplessness at all of the things he used to never question, such as walking, or driving, that were suddenly beyond his grasp. He found himself yelling and barking orders at the people he loved most, trying to seize some control of a life that was changing before he could even begin to understand what these changes meant.

“For a short stint, I was a dick... and I think that was me coping,” admitted Curtis.

There were, amidst an onslaught of wheelchairs, therapy, doctors, and machines, several constants in Curtis’ life.

“I’ve got good friends,” said Curtis suddenly, nodding his head as if in affirmation. “As tempting as it is off the gate to be reckless, to refuse to face the world... my friends made me do it.”

As somebody who defined himself by his independence, his self-perception took a difficult hit when he could no longer take care of himself.

“It’s been a very humbling experience because so many people have to help you along the way,” admitted Curtis. “The day before my injury, I never needed anybody’s help. But I went from a doer to a feeler.”

This transition taught him the huge role that attitude, and controlling one’s thoughts and emotions, can play in the recovery process.

“There are times when you want to give up and quit. There were time I was at the precipice, but I had to tell myself, ‘Don’t go home yet, 10 more seconds,’” said Curtis, running his hand over the wheel of his wheelchair.

His inner struggle for perseverance and stamina began to yield a series of victories. Curtis’ first real taste of independence in his new, drastically changed life was when we

went on a scuba diving trip six months after his injury. While on his trip, he dove through a 103-degree fever, dealt with the frustration of having his bags arrive two days late, and most importantly, had an incredible experience as he felt his limbs take on a new strength deep underwater.

Another small but life-changing victory was when Curtis was able to begin driving again.

“The first time I successfully got the chair into my car on my own was 45 minutes of agony, and scratches on my car,” smiled Curtis. “But once I started driving, it set me free.”

Though Curtis measures his recovery in landmarks and a series of triumphs, his physical trainer, Andrew Rosales of the Seton Brain & Spine Institute, finds Curtis’ victories in each day of effort and determination.

“It’s been amazing to see his progress,” said Rosales, shaking his head. “He’s been amazing.”

A change in life and approach to everything previously taken for granted has shaped Curtis’ ambitions, and though he still loves the food and beverage industry, Curtis hopes to develop of mentor program for people who have to go through the same recovery process that he is still fighting through.

“Nobody told me about things I should ask my doctor,” said Curtis. “There were no textbook questions for the questions I’d ask. They’d just say, ‘For this person, scenario A – for this other person, scenario B – for you, question mark.’”

He wants to make the whole transition through life-changing crisis a quicker, less bewildering one with his mentor program by providing resources and counseling for those recently injured who have to reshape their self-image to include a word they never imagined applying to themselves: quadriplegic.

Curtis' own transition has been a long and arduous one, but one that he plans to emerge from on two feet and walking.

"I've got this whole new life now, which 15 months later is starting to feel more normal," said Curtis. "You start forgetting about the life you had before, and start focusing on the life you have now."

Curtis pushed his wheelchair forward, resting his hands on his lap. "There's all sorts of silver linings to be seen in what was once a devastating loss. You know, I look forward to life now. There was a time that I didn't, but things will always g