

ABI Toronto Network Conference Hilton

November 3 & 4, 2008

Good afternoon everyone. It is a pleasure to be here to take part in wrapping up your conference. I enjoyed the sessions I attended & trust you found yours as interesting and informative.

To describe in a sentence what I'm going to share is....., **“What it is like to begin your day in one life and wake up in another both Professionally and Privately”**. The people I have met and spoken to who have experience something similar to me all seem to pursue the same goals in the early stages of their recovery. They spend every ounce of their energy trying to recover & step right back in where they so suddenly left their life.

The only problem with this ideology is the rest of the world doesn't stop and wait for us to get there does it??? And we are not the same person returning to that old life are we.

Now it is quite likely some people in this room will identify with some of the things I talk about, as you have lived through it or are going through them right now. It's also possible what your facing has nothing to do with a brain injury, but it is a injury in your life, and I know you will be able to identify

with me.

TOGETHER we can make a difference in this world. I have witnessed it and I have lived it for that last 8 ½ years. There is no secret formula it is about being brave, having goals, setting guidelines, & moving beyond where we are today. I read somewhere that;

Courage does not always roar, Sometimes it is a quiet voice at the end of the day saying, **“I will try again!!!”**

Now on the conference flyer I am introduced as “Brain Injury Survivor.” Take a moment and think about what that word **survivor** means and what face do you attach to it. I will be very honest with you I have never been overly fond of the label and in an effort to explain to you why..... I went to the dictionary and looked it up. It says, **SURVIVOR** “One who survives,,,,,Who is capable of surviving changing conditions,,,,, misfortunes. Now I’m not sure, but that likely describes every single one of us in the room today.....

2.

Depending on how your morning went, this last week, last month, perhaps your entire life..... Maybe all you’ve been doing is surviving, which gives me

comfort in a strange way, because I'm not alone in these struggles of change.

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Now as I look around I find myself curious about all the experience in this room. If given the opportunity what would each of **you** tell us about yourself.

For just a moment I'd like **you** to think about .....all the components that fit together to define you. What are the things & where are the places you look in your life to explain who you are? Perhaps many of us had aspirations & very specific goals early in our life. With some planning and hard work we've achieved them. So we have our knapsack of life full of positive stuff and there is always the addition of other life experiences both positive and negative collected along our journey that helps to define who we are today.

Is it possible in this journey called our life that we don't realize it, but there are defining pieces of us that can disappear in a heartbeat? Can our lives suddenly change so drastically that everything is altered forever. **The answer to that question is yes.** I have witnessed it from within the boundaries of my police uniform, & have lived it for the last 8 ½ years up close and personal.

Now I know that most of us are all governed by policies and procedures within our careers that dictate our decisions & our choices. But anyone here who has done much living knows LIFE doesn't seem to adhere very well to the policy and procedures. It ever changing and we are in the race to keep up.

The majority of us really struggle with change don't we? ESPECIALLY when we feel we had no control over the imposed changes.

### 3.

I mean **familiarity** creates a feeling of security doesn't it?

Unfamiliar/Uncharted territory creates an atmosphere of anxiety & insecurity in our life.

So you can imagine what occurred when the established patterns of my life were suddenly altered without warning or permission.

For 12 years I daily stepped through the doors of peoples home in York Region and became a part of their life/chaos perhaps only for a moment or

a few hours, but I did it over and over. All that time I thought my whole purpose was to get control of the situations. But I have discovered it had nothing to do with control it was about choice. The whole reason for me to go to work each day was to deal with the outcome & consequences of other people's choices. It had nothing to do with control. Those experiences forever change me and my outlook on life, but they no better equipped me than the next person to deal with the chaos that was about to become my life. All I can tell you is it showed me the power of choice in your lives and the ripple effect to so many people. (the old stone thrown in a pond affect.

The ripple effect it created in my life threatened to destroy every facet of it.

Once I got a grasp on the fact security in Life had absolutely nothing to do with control..... I was able to start being completely honest with myself about .....what I had become and that my accident wasn't about control or even choice, but I certainly had a choice on what I did with the outcome of that trip home..

I can honestly tell you the simplicity and truth of that wisdom was lost to me until I faced what I have for the last 8 years.

We may not be able to control what happens to us in this life, but we sure

have the power to choose what we do with the events of it.....

There is power in that 6 letter word "CHOICE".

#### 4.

Now that I am almost 9 years post accident I can honestly tell you that **Surviving is Surviving regardless of the details we attach to it.** Every single one of us are unique and different, handling a wide range of experiences/things in very different ways. So what I share with you is not the right way or necessarily the wrong way it is simply the choices we have made to get me where I am today. Notice I said we because this entire journey has been one of teamwork & partnership as I could never had done it on my own.

There some basic facts I need to share with you so you able get a better understanding of who I was , who I have become and what it means for me to be standing here talking with you today.

On paper it states I am in my 21<sup>st</sup> year as a York Regional Police Officer. But unfortunately I have not reported to duty since I signed off my notebook

at 5:00pm on the 29th of December, 1999. Now up until this point in my life everything was unfolding into some pretty spectacular stuff. (personally & professionally). Not that there hadn't been challenges growing up, but life was starting to get pretty amazing.

The year of 99 I'd been awarded bravery in the line of duty and police officer of the year by an International Police Association. There had been investigative opportunities....in the Homicide unit, then the Child Abuse & Sexual Assault Unit. That October..... I was the first female on our force formally trained as a hostage negotiator. Wow ....talk about exiting & challenging all at the same time.

My private life was also terrific. I had and still have the same caring, supportive husband of 20 years who made then & now possible. He drove me here last night and took time off work to be here today. We had 2 healthy boys, who are now 12 and 16. A lovely home, everything it seemed we strive for to confirm success in our life.

## 5.

Then .....On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December everything changed forever. It started

with a car accident that resulted in me suffering;

A Fractured pelvis in 4 places

5 broken ribs

Punctured Bowel

Punctured Diaphragm

Collapsed Lung

Closed head injury W/Basal skull fracture

4<sup>th</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> cranial nerves have been damaged resulting in some speech & swallowing issues,

At the accident scene My Glasco Coma scale was 6 eventually rising to 8

There was Double vision, which lasted well over 6 months & a right eye that wandered all over the place?

I wore an eye patch for 4 to 5 of those months so I could navigate and not bounce off the walls.

I lived with constant dizziness for close to 2 years & have experienced relapses of that since and for a time the left side of my face drooped due to

## nerve damage

Every time I read off this list I tell people it is not shared to be dramatic or evoke sympathy it is simply to demonstrate how broken you can be & recover when something horrible occurs in your life.

It doesn't have to be an actual physical injury like mine. Damage in our lives can take many different forms.... Divorce, A death, Financial ruin....it is endless how each of us may define a tragedy. ....

When something like this happens **time seems to stop** and everything becomes defined **by before or after the incident**. It is like we lose our way and this is the only tangible thing we're able to use to define time and space in our life.

## 6.

Now I want to let you know it matters not what it is.....NO hurt is too great to heal from. I encourage anyone here today who thinks, what their facing is beyond hope, I want to tell you it isn't. Please Remember;

**Success is not Final**

Failure is Not Fatal,

It is the COURAGE to Continue that Counts.

PAUSE.....

Recovery is a very difficult thing on many different levels. There is the physical mending of the body that can be somewhat straight forward, but it is the emotional trauma that can cripple a person. The injury doesn't just happen to a person it happens to the entire family unit and each intricate part brings their own dynamic to the equation. Whether..... positive or negative we are all individuals in our own right. If you take nothing else from here today please **remember** every [person you meet in life is unique & special](#). Each of them in their own way are a collection of pieces, much like a puzzle that when fit together correctly can create a beautiful picture.

Here is where any of us who have suffered loss in our life face some tough choices.

[To become totally consumed by the magnitude of the loss & change](#) OR

[Choose to embrace what we still have no matter how small it may appear.](#)

We must try to find hope.... I have learned just because we don't always get what we ask for doesn't mean God can't deliver it. It just means perhaps it wasn't part of His plan.

## 7.

Ladies & Gentlemen.....

It was 3 days after Christmas and all the gifts were still open under our tree. I was on a road I'd driven my entire life in far worse weather. It took them almost an hour to cut the roof off my car, get me out & on route to the hospital. The weather illuminated an air ambulance so I was driven to St. Michael's Hospital here in the city. But before they sent me off, the doctor tell my parents..... "we've done all we can for her....prepare yourselves she may not make it given her injuries."

AS this was happening my husband was on his way home from work & rerouted around an accident. He pulled into our driveway and my car wasn't there and should have been. Our sitter met him at the door with the news I'd been in an accident to call the hospital immediately..... Little did he know the accident he went around ...was mine.

I hung in there long enough for the doctors to patch the holes and then the waiting game began.

My life became a routine of, physio-therapy, , as well as daily exercise at home..... Doctor's appointments and assessments that left me feeling like a science experiment no one understood. How could anyone possibly understand me I couldn't articulate the magnitude of the problems, so how could the person listening decipher it? It is necessary, but you are asked repeatedly by every professional that crosses your path, give us brief history and specifically why are you here? Every time you have to explain it.... is one more brick on your already overwhelming load.

As you try to navigate your way through this maze of Rehabilitation one truly feels like they have been thrown into [foreign country with no interpreter!!!!!!](#)

So this is where I ask each therapist in the room please make every effort to supply your clients with the details **on paper**, even if they appear non-comprehending at the time.

## 8.

Having it on paper in their possession.....allows them at some point in

their recovery if they choose they can read it and perhaps understand something a little better. I have read things **over and over and over** in the last 8 yrs. It was out of a desperate need to understand my injuries & the ramification of them. Comprehension did come eventually for some things.

I know for a fact there were many times I would shake my head in acknowledgment, when all I understood was I was confused and too bloody tired to ask for more information. Why bother? When I knew I wouldn't get it anyway.

The old pride and vanity thing can sure trip us up if you allow it to.

~~ Having the printed information gave me a sense of comfort & order when so much seemed the opposite in my life. It took me months to read through the files, but it helped to fill in many blank spaces and gave me a sense of accomplishment. It's not retained in my memory bank much of the time, but I know I could pull out the folder with ST. Mikes or Neurology on it and eventually find the answers to the questions floating around in my head.

There is still lots I don't understand and that can create much frustration & friction within our family, but we each try to take a deep breath.....

communicate as best we can through each conflict. That's not to say there aren't lots of very loud discussions, but we keep trying and that is the main thing.

I will forever struggle with short-term memory, comprehension, fatigue & pain issues, but there have been improvements.. ..... Many of them in this last 3 years, and I am 8 1/2 years post accident. So I caution all of you in following the 2 year model for recovery right to the letter. There is so much more that can be accomplished with time.

I really have a unique perspective that many of you here don't. I have gone from being one of you..... "THE PUBLIC SERVANT" governed by policy and procedure. To being the client in need of the services and oh how different it is on the other side.

## 9.

I now know what it is like to have strangers come into the most private

places of your life in an attempt to help you. This is what I did daily and an officer

The rehab professionals who entered my life were never able to give me the number one thing on my list ....["My old life back."](#) Just like I could never really completely fix what was broken in the lives I visited as an officer.

The professionals ever present in my life early in my recovery relentless reminded me of what I used to accomplish and could no longer. They were there to help me but what I was feeling were they simply pointed out with very obvious clarity; what I had lost, what didn't exist anymore.

It seemed they suddenly expected me to do far more than u did before the injury and **all of it with far less ability**. I'm not talking about climbing a mountain. I am referring to some of the simplest things we all learn to take for granted early on in our life. They were probably the most difficult to come to terms with. The everyday stuff we all do & have been doing most of our life.

It can be rather frustrating trying to explain what doesn't work because I

look just fine on the outside and present like most people much of the time.

Brain Injury is often referred to as the “Silent Injury”, because so many don’t understand or readily recognize the subtle things that can be affected in a person with compromised brain function. It doesn’t have to be a horrific accident like mine to have lasting repercussions. Force or damage of any kind can change a life forever. We **can** manage without an arm, a leg, even a kidney, but without the main control panel (our brain) nothing functions as it should.

This **analogy** I’ve come up with to explain the injury to my brain.

## 10.

I was 34 at the time of the accident & it had taken me 34 years to fill up that filing cabinet of life called MY BRAIN.

It wasn’t even close to full, but still overflowing with material. Many of the files I had consciously placed in there....., while others had accumulated

through managing the daily challenges of life.....

I'd like everyone in the room to think about their filing cabinet and what is in it??? Some stuff you could have done without I'm sure, but others are so priceless no amount of money could replace them. Without warning an event takes place that causes the filing cabinet to be dumped upside down.....almost emptied.

All those orderly files that were arranged, sequenced and filed in certain places for certain reasons explode into a chaotic mess.

What I faced as I tried to retrieve and re-file all the scrambled information back in order was pure confusion. I couldn't find things. I knew it was before, but the information wasn't now. I couldn't spell things, I didn't understand the simplest of material.

Frustrating doesn't really begin to explain how I felt. I'd lost the ability to do things I had been doing my entire life. Some things since I was a child.

I have no recollection of the accident and am missing 9 to 10 days of my total memory. It is simply a black hole in my life. It is my husband, my children and my parents who have the memories of all that. I came home from the hospital in a wheelchair on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2000 being

assisted with everything. In the beginning if I didn't focus on my eating I would choke. I slowly moved from a wheel chair to crutches, then a cane. My cranial nerves healed & I've regained the functions they affected..... BUT I am still left with permanent damage to my brain & orthopaedic ally.

## 11.

It is very difficult when you have to think about a whole new way to get from A to B and accept the new way as a permanent process. Your life suddenly seems to slide under this microscope, where every nook and cranny has to be examined. It was so distressing because the things you look at are things you never thought about before .....they just worked..... Now you had to break down every task to try and make it achievable. It is so exhausting that you want to quit, withdraw and just make do with existing.....Getting through a day is just **TOO difficult**.

I mean life is truly a balancing act & felt I had been doing not half bad at balancing all the pieces of my life as an officer, a wife, a mother, a daughter.

Then suddenly I am made to walk this precarious tight rope..... in high winds no less that was the size of a shoelace....., when I'd been fairly competent walking a 2X4 with reinforced centers. No longer could I depend on my body to step up to the challenge. Gone is the confidence that whatever needs to be done I can deliver.....Oh the despair that can create.

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I tried to use all the techniques that they teach you, but it's so difficult to persevere when each step threatens to defeat you. You see my original goal was return to work September 2000 a mere 8 months after my accident. I truly did not understand the magnitude of my injuries and what they were translating into for my life.

Now I had a few hurdles during my recovery, but one that almost totally

derailed me was a no risk treatment that was supposed to improve me or leave me the same. I had the procedure in October of 2002 by that Christmas I had to stop all rehab due to the pain I was in. I was back with a cane and suffering that crippling pain I came home in while still in a wheelchair. I just watched **2 years** of gruelling exercise and treatments disappear in 4 short doctor's appointments. **What do I do now?**

Over and over I asked God, "what do you want from me?" I don't have the strength or ability to keep facing everything that is happening to me and my family.

12.

OH Fear of the unknown can be paralyzing to anyone..... not just a person like me, with a brain injury. We face all the same emotions & challenges. It is no walk in the park. It is a dark and frightening place to find one's self.

... At any stage in my recovery it would have been so easy to just **curl up inside that blanket of self-pity, angry and despair**. All that consumes you is

the loss, the complete and total loss of everything predictable and controlled in my life.

Once I realized ... YES we have all lost a great deal, BUT I'm still here **DIFFERENT** but still walking, talking and breathing, so what am I going to do with this gift called my life.

As I said earlier everyone "the most powerful thing anyone of us in this room will ever possess in our life is the ability to make "A CHOICE"!!

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Once more .....I get back up and begin again. Set new goals, career objectives. I wasn't giving up I wanted to go back to work if it killed me trying to get there. We organized a work hardening trial at my girlfriends clothing store..... "Cathy Allan's Ladies Wear" it was close to home so I could drive myself. This was a long way from chasing bad guys and investigating crime, but it was a start at something.

In all of this I discovered that **Anger**, **Pride** and **Worry** can be some of the

heaviest burdens a person can carry & that they truly serve no constructive purpose in any of our lives.

So what do you do with all of the Emotion? Where do you begin to make a different life?

### 13.

Well.....It is definitely done with baby by steps & it all starts with getting **real** & **honest** with yourself. This requires more courage than you could ever imagine. I suddenly found myself with a whole lot of time to reflect upon my life. What had I accomplished, where was I going, what had I compromised in the pursuit of success and then the hard part?

My family.... my children, my husband. I had such overwhelming guilt because my condition had damaged pieces of their life.... I didn't know if they would ever recover from. I had lost a career but they had lost pieces of their life that could never be retrieved.

Everyone was spending so much time making it all about me, when there were other people suffering right along with me and **I couldn't help them**

because I was the cause.

Somewhere in all of these struggles I had lost sight of the most important responsibility I had been given...The privilege of being a mother and the fact that I would never ever stop being that. I have found a whole new appreciation for being a mom. How many of us in this room have said? “If only I could stay home with the kids.” Well I have been given that gift. It just took me a long time to see the blessing of it, due to how it was packaged & the method of delivery.

I have learned to lean on my family much more, as well as all those people who become an intricate part of our lives whether we think we need them or not.

Having someone who is **only** going to tell you what you want to hear does NO ONE any favours especially you. I know I have been there and still go there some days.

I am here and in this condition only because of some very *patience*,

*support* and loving people that cared & never stopped caring.

## 14.

I am fortunate they have learned to accept & live with a different me. It was a long and difficult road for all of us. We have chosen to love each other through it all. Currie & I just celebrated our 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary on October 8th and together we have learned;

It's not about what's happened....It's about what you do with it

Now I've learned a number of coping strategies in 8 yrs that help to compensate for what doesn't work. And for short periods of time things can seem to be working properly.....I feel like the old me. I think wow maybe I've turned a corner, something **permanent** has changed, I've got my filing cabinet in order.

But then the Light switches affect starts happening. What I mean by that is this; As I motor along in a task I will hesitate because it has suddenly

gotten rather difficult to remember what I was doing. I can't quite decipher it but I'll ignore it because it'll come to me. As I continue/proceed it becomes exceedingly more difficult to figure out what I need to be doing. It truly feels like..... someone is running ahead of me switching out the lights in my head, as I open a new filing cabinet drawer looking for the information & depending on the day whether there is pain or additional fatigue it can be happening with alarming speed. The faster I run the fast the switches flick off. Till suddenly I find I am in total darkness I can't make out anything..... only that I'm totally confused, exhausted from all that running and I hit that wall of reality.

**There have been no miraculous, permanent changes. I was just enjoying few hours of [successful strategy use](#) and the brain is tired so give it a break till tomorrow.**

So you see everyone regardless of the successes..... I still have to daily face the reality & truth of who I have become. How I **MUST** do things now.....You struggle with so many different things as you try to rebuild your life and it took me 4 years before I could see that there was absolutely nothing I could physically do to change what I had become.

I could never ever be the Carolyn Matthews of December 29th, 1999 again and OH how I grieved that girl. The process of loss I went through was almost identical to actually losing a loved one..... **because I had lost me**... And I was never getting that me back. I experienced all the same emotions of anger, grief and despair. I had to work through every one of them and revisit them again and again until I could lay that old Carolyn to rest. It is the learning to accept and deal with the fact they are gone forever & move forward with your life that's the challenge.

In order for me to move forward I had to get over the credentials of a police officer and close that chapter in my life which has enabled me to move forward in a new direction. I have faced an extreme change in my life.

I spend my time and energy navigating what I like to think of as; **the shark infested waters of disappointment, unfinished tasks and so forth.**

I've learned **Failure can only occur if we fail to try!!!**

I am thankful for the experiences my career has given me. Those 12 years helped shape the person I am today and the challenge has been to realize, **it isn't about capturing the OLD it is about breaking totally new ground in a world I'd never been a part and quite frankly never aspired to be a member of.**

Oh but there have been unexpected blessing and some lessons in life we only seem to learn through grief and sorrow. While others have a larger purpose that is beyond our comprehension.

## 16.

### AS I CLOSE:

I want to show you how the words that I shared today are put together. If I am totally honest with you it has taken almost 8 years to capture & express all of them in a way that you might understand.

Now 8 years to complete an writing assignment certainly is not going to be a selling feature on any resume, but they are shared in an honest and forthright way in hopes that someone, somewhere might benefit from them.

I have been placed on permanent disability and will never return to active duty with York Regional. I struggled to accept that because on paper I still hold the badge and credentials of a police officer, but my body will not rise to the challenge required to ever wear my uniform again. It will forever hang in a closet for safe keeping.

Please know that everything I've shared today is straight from my heart and my life. My family and I have lived every one of these moments up close and personal. They have been shared to help encourage anyone here who thinks they can't make it. I want to tell you that you can... **You can survive tragedy and change in your life... Battered!!! & Scarred!!!! But you can!! Do it.**

**Perhaps one of the secrets is to not limit yourself to being defined exclusively by the tragedy or in my case the accident & my injuries. There is so much more to each of us, if we can find the Strength & Courage to discover it.**

Now I know I have thrown a lot at you and perhaps not in a very organized fashion. I've done it in an attempt to give you a look inside the people you treat and how they maybe feeling but never effectively seem to convey. These are the REALITIES behind case number #71243 and the name attached to it is Mrs. Carolyn Matthews of #17 Doble Dr in Oakwood. These are important and intimate detail that sometimes get lost in this whole process because we sometimes get so busy with the process part we lose sight of the people part.

## 17.

I know this because.....I have now been a part of both Systems. Serving the Public with a title and badge number #657, as well as requiring the service from the system. It has shown me;

**There is no such thing in anyone's Life as an Unimportant Day**

**If you remember nothing from today : please try to remember this:**

Most Days I look like any other woman on the street. No one would have any idea what secrets this old body holds.

They may become curious if it's a day I'm limping or struggling with words and comprehension, but they'd have no idea the steps I've taken to try to ensure success for that day in my life. I have become the post child for the old saying, "DON'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER!"

I have experienced firsthand that we can never know how much **OUR ACTIONS** or **LACK OF ACTION** can affect another's life.

People may forget what we have said,

They may even forget exactly what we did,

**BUT they will never forget how we made them feel!!!!**

That time you didn't give your best may have been the moment someone needed you the most.

I now look at people in a totally different way. I have spent time in a wheelchair as well as facing daily life with challenges that aren't glaringly obvious to others. I have been affected by people's assumption and judgements that are made by what they see on the outside.

When I look at people now...I wonder what burden's they carry. What lies beneath the surface? If they have someone who really cares?

