

Garry Swanson

Do you remember the group of amputees from GFS who participated in the Sun Run this year. Garry Swanson is a 32-year-old father of 2 girls, from Kimberly, who made difficult choices most of us will never understand.

Garry was injured in a work related accident in 1995, a forklift backed over his foot, leaving it mangled. The 16 surgeries he had did not fix his foot, and 10 years after his original work injury he had gained a lifestyle of chronic pain, unemployment, anger, and anxiety. He watched as his wife assumed some of his roles, doing more than her fair share of the work. He lost his financial security, his ability to play with his kids and take his dog for a walk, his sense of humor, and most importantly, he lost hope. He became damaged and broken by the years of pain and suffering and his lack of success and accomplishment. What he didn't lose was his basic ability to fight. What he didn't know he had was buckets of courage.

His first difficult choice was asking to have his foot amputated, what we call an elective amputation. Most people thought he was crazy.

His second difficult choice was to be away from his family for long periods of time while having his rehab at GFS in Vancouver. A complete team with years of experience in amputee rehab would devise a program that would get Garry through the fact finding of making his amputation decision, support his family in the process, liaison with his local WCB office, and most importantly linking him with other people having amputations so that he could gain information from those ahead of him in the rehab process.

Would you ever have thought that having a symbolic burial to say goodbye to his dysfunctional foot, might be part of his emotional journey. He was haunted by negative visual images of his mangled foot, and emotionally carried years of grief. He vented to his team often and supported by Social Work he went to a beautiful place in his mind to bury his shoe.

His daily physical rehab worked on stretching, strengthening, cardio, and teaching him how to look after his limb. He had to unlearn the bad habits he'd developed after years of walking on his painful foot. Frequent apts. would be needed with his local prosthetist, Dana Rousseau at Pentlands Prosthetics.

9 months later Garry has completed our Phase 4, a high level part of our clinical pathway of care. The outcomes of this phase are a return to high impact activity – like jogging, jumping and landing on his prosthesis, lifting and carrying heavy weight, and having the cardiovascular stamina to bike, and walk long distances. At the start of the Sun Run, Gary said to himself, 'we'll see how far I can go,

never thinking I would finish it. This accomplishment got me over a huge hump, feeling like I could achieve things again'.

The most important outcome is that Garry now has hope. He is taking back long lost roles, like walking his kids to school, building a balcony extension on their house, digging holes to repot shrubs and hiking. He no longer has chronic pain, and is thankful that his foot is gone.

The unknown outcome on discharge was whether Garry would get back to work, not having a job to return to. So long out of the workforce and dependent on a third party funder for disability income, it is a scary issue to face finding a job and returning to work. It's scary to worry about getting hurt again.

Transition to community is not always smooth, clean and tidy. Once home he and his wife talked frankly about his anger, stress and attitude. Then he had an epiphany - "my full time job for the past 10 years on disability had been dealing with pain and loss. I fought with WCB and argued about everything, often assuming that I was getting short changed". Arguing and anger had become his baseline emotional space. He changed his attitude and decided he would pick his arguments carefully, leaving most of them on the table.

The outcome we all hoped for came 8 weeks after his discharge when he got his first job in over 10 years. He called on his second day of full-time work, over the moon, saying 'I'm waiting for someone to pinch me and tell me this is a dream. My new employer is OK with my prosthesis, and he's willing to work me in gradually to driving a heavy-duty piece of logging equipment'. Gary's daughter Jessica was 3 years old when he last worked, and has no memory of her father having a job. With his lunch, comes a package of home baked cookies from his daughters with a note saying 'having a great day at work Dad – we love you'.

'Having a job makes me feel like a whole person again, like I'm doing my part in life, and it feels so good to be able to look after my family again'.

Can't you just hear the sound of elation and pride in his voice?

