

John Higgins

John Higgins was an ordinary teenager who loved playing basketball and had big plans for his future, but all that changed the day his back was broken in a workplace accident. He was only 16, it was his first job, and it turned his life upside down.

“A family friend helped me get the job at a recycling plant in Vancouver,” says John. “Getting the job, I felt like a man. I was the definition of an eager young worker. If someone told me to do it, I’d do it. I didn’t think about safety.”

After working just one month, John was asked to drive a forklift. He didn’t get any formal training to operate a forklift and didn’t even know there was such a thing as a license for operating one. “Training was like a foreign word there,” he says. “You learned by example or experience. There were things that seemed unsafe but I assumed it was just part of the job.”

On Sunday, September 27, 1998, John’s boss asked him to come in for a few extra hours. His job that day was to paint some things yellow, ironically for safety reasons. He used a forklift to lift up a weigh scale to paint the lower part of it. Once lifted, he noticed that the forklift was blocking the aisle. So he stood beside the forklift and put it into reverse, intending to guide it back a few feet and then stop it. “Apparently this is forbidden, but no one had told me you should never put a forklift in gear when you’re not sitting in it,” he says.

“I didn’t notice that the forklift’s wheels were turned sharply. It started to move backwards, and I panicked, thinking I’m going to get in a lot of trouble if this hits something. I ran around trying to get back into the forklift as it’s moving.” But John hadn’t noticed a puddle of hydraulic fluid in his way. He slipped and fell on his face in the path of the forklift and rolled onto his back. The forklift drove into his hip and crushed him against another machine. He screamed for about 10 seconds until a co-worker jumped onto the forklift and drove it off him. His back was broken and his kidney was crushed. If his co-worker had not heard him right away, the forklift would have killed John.

John was rushed to hospital. He woke up three days later with 65 staples, three rods and six screws in his back, one less kidney, paralyzed legs, and very little hope of ever walking again. His back was broken and a connection to one of his kidneys was torn.

He spent four months in rehab undergoing intensive physiotherapy. Doctors said he would never walk normally again. He later had a second operation to remove scar tissue on his intestines. He is walking now but with pain.

“I use a cane now to walk, or when going long distances, I’ll use a wheelchair,” he says. “There are so many things the average person my age takes for granted, like being able to go for a run or play basketball,” says John. “There’s nothing I do today where I don’t have to think, ‘Can I walk that far or stand up that long?’”

He has strong words of warning for other young workers. “Make sure you know what kind of training you need,” he cautions. “Know your rights, know what is required of you and what is required of your employer.”

John can’t walk to the bus stop or corner store and can’t lift heavy objects. He needs to sit down every few minutes and will never make the basketball team again. Because of a preventable workplace accident, he’s had to rethink his future. But at least he has one to rethink.

