

Nick Perry

When Nick Perry finished high school, he began to plan his independence and move out of his mom's house. But a workplace accident ended those plans and made him more dependent than he ever was as a child.

When Nick was 19, he got a job at a Victoria lumberyard. "All the training I got was basically just passed down from other workers," says Nick. "The only training I got on driving a forklift was that I was told this goes up, back, down, forward. Here's the gas, here's the brake. That's it."

He had been working at the lumberyard a few months when he went in for a regular Saturday shift on November 3, 2001. He went into a back shed to bring out some large sheets of fiberboard on the forklift. The stack he had to move weighed more than 1200 kilograms and was made up of 42 loose sheets of lumber.

"I was looking at the load thinking, 'geez, I don't want somebody to hurt themselves,'" says Nick. He lifted the load with a forklift and backed it away from the shed. As he reversed, the load shifted a little bit and started to slip off the forks, so he decided to get off and push the boards back on. His co-worker hopped on the forklift to help, and Nick told him to lower the forks.

Just as he turned away from the forklift, the entire load suddenly slid off the forks and smashed into his back, driving him to the ground and doubling him forward at the waist. "The stuff hit me at such a velocity that it immediately broke my back and I just folded in half and laid under the stuff on the ground," he says.

Nick was rushed to hospital, then transferred to Vancouver where he had 12 hours of surgery. Part of his spine was reconstructed and a corner of one of his ribs was grafted into his back. He spent three months in rehabilitation then returned home to Victoria, where he continues to receive physiotherapy. He is a paraplegic and spends most of his time in a wheelchair.

"There is constant embarrassment now that someone else dresses me," he says. "I have no bowel function. I have a tube up my penis to pee. It makes me feel like I'm two years old."

Nick's social life is a lot different now than before he lost the use of his legs. "If you're not an attractive guy, girls don't want to get with you, so how attractive is it that I'm in a wheelchair?" he says.

"I'm a young guy, and I feel like all this responsibility has been placed on me," he adds. "I can't go and have fun like my buddies. I'd love to be able to dance now, but I can't. If I go to the bar and see people dancing, it pisses me off that I can't do that."

Nick wants other young workers to be better prepared for the workplace. "Ask more questions, get more familiar with the job before you start doing things by yourselves," he says. "The more you learn, the safer you are. Always make sure you're looking out for yourself."

Nick is working on becoming more independent, but is no longer planning to move into his own apartment right now. "All that independence that you worked so hard to gain can be taken away from you in a snap of your fingers," he warns. "Know your rights at work, because you can get hurt. Just look at what happened to me."

