

Certain Blessings...

By *Sandra Longo*

Let me first begin to say thank you to you and Spinal Cord Injury Ontario, for allowing me to share the story of my family's life, which inspired me to create Navy Street Charity.

I also want to explain how thankful I am for the grace of God, because he has blessed me in so many ways. What I know for sure is that there is beauty that lies in life's difficult challenges. Often you need to look for it, but I do know that it is there. My words cannot express how grateful I am today for so many blessings during hardships, and if it were not for these experiences, I would not be who I am today.

My story starts with my parents. My mother and father married more than 43 years ago, and they had three children soon after they wed, and all within the same year. My oldest sister Laura was born first, and then my twin brother Mark and I came nine months later. This was a beautiful yet demanding time for my parents. My father was self-employed, and my mother gave up her career as a social worker to look after her three little babies.

Shortly thereafter, my father was in a horrible car accident. A huge cement truck made a turn in front of his car and he crashed into it. His car looked like an accordion! He was severely hurt, crushed from the legs down and the prognosis looked grim for his survival. My mother rushed to be by his side. My father had sustained many injuries; many crushed bones in both of his legs, and he had to have major heart surgery to put his main arteries back together. But he was lucky, he survived. Today he walks with a limp, and will for the rest of his life. He has endured lingering pain, both physical and mental since that day. The dampness and the cold affect his body, and his legs constantly ache. Throughout all of this, with help from family members, my mother continued to maintain the household, feed her three little babies, and keep the business afloat. My father recovered enough to come home and he eventually began to work again to support our family.

As life started to take shape and all seemed to be going on a straight path again, the next obstacle happened. My mother was taking my siblings and me to the store. All three of us were about five years old, when all of a sudden my twin brother Mark opened the car door when my mother was reversing the car out of our driveway. He fell out in one quick swoop and was all of sudden trapped under the car. Thank goodness there was a home being built across the street and some neighbours could hear my mother's screams. The workers came running from across the street with some neighbours to help. The men lifted the car off of my brother. He suffered major



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blood loss, and the flesh from the side of his face was missing from the top of his eye to the bottom of his chin, and he was in shock. He kept saying that his finger hurt, and I could not understand how he could complain about the tiniest scrape on his finger, when all I could see was the bones in his face and blood everywhere.

My family spent the next year going back and forth to Sick Children's Hospital. Mark endured several skin grafts throughout the next few years to help close up the wound that was too large to ever heal on its own. I remember visiting him in the hospital often. He still smiled as he lay in bed with bandages all over his face. I could only see his cute brown eyes sticking out, and I remember trying to make him feel like everything was going to be okay. I tried to make him happy, anything to just make him happy and wishing for all his pain to go away. Eventually the frequency of hospital visits diminished and life went back to normal, although Mark had the funniest cast on his head for a very long time. We all signed his cast on his head like it was a helmet of honour. This memory still makes me smile, because after all, Mark was going to be okay despite the major scar he would have forever.

Life at home eventually went back to normal. Typical family outings and chores, trips to the grocery store, kids playing in the back yard, and my

mother began volunteering at the school, keeping on eye on Mark as he attended school and continued to recover. She was caring for our home, cooked dinner, and life was beginning to be happy again for us all. Although my father still had a tremendous amount of pain from his lingering surgeries, he did the best he could.

Two years later when Mark's surgeries just about rapped up, my parents announced to us that they were going to have another baby. We were so excited. It was a happy moment, but what was supposed to be a joyous occasion for a family soon turned into despair. My mother went into labour on Dec. 8th, just before Christmas. While she was in the delivery room she underwent an epidural for a C-Section. When the epidural was administered, my mother sustained a traumatic spinal cord injury, with paralysis from her waist down. She spent the next year or more in rehabilitation to adjust to her new life.

The baby had to come home, and we as a family had to adjust to a new mother who had to live with paraplegia. She no longer could take care of herself, or her three nine year olds, plus a new baby. She went to Lyndhurst Rehabilitation Centre to learn to adjust to her new life, eventually came home, and we as a family adjusted out of necessity. But she was trapped in our home, because of the dreadful stairs. She couldn't go upstairs or downstairs, and could not just walk out of the front door. As she described it, she was a prisoner. I used to wonder if ever there a fire, what would happen to my mother? How would she be able to get out? No child should ever have to worry about if their parent would die in a fire because they are trapped in the house; no one should ever have to worry about accessibility, period. It should be a human birthright!

The years continued on, and my mother faced many hardships, many falls out of her wheelchair, health concerns, and the list goes on forever. We learned how to lift my mother up or down a few flights of stairs. But mostly she became secluded because of accessibility issues. This impacted us entirely as a family. I was so eager to help, but I didn't know exactly what I could do. I promised myself that one day, I was going to help families who were in a similar circumstance, but I just wasn't sure how I could help.

On January 31, 2013, I was driving to work when all of a sudden my vehicle hit black ice and began to slide out of control. Within seconds my car flipped over and I landed in a culvert filled with water. I was hanging upside down, and almost immediately water began to pour into my vehicle towards my face. I was trapped and was beginning to drown. I didn't have time to be rescued. I prayed to God, like I never prayed before, and I promised that if I got out of that car alive, I would do something good to help others. Something that I always knew I wanted to do, and that was to help individuals who were touched by spinal cord injuries.

A strength suddenly came from within me, and I was able to unlatch my seatbelt. Then, all of a sudden, my head came crashing down onto the roof of the car. My instinct told me to protect my head because of all the awareness I had about spinal cord injuries. That saved my life, but I was told after a long recovery that I sustained a minor spinal cord injury. If I had any more pressure or damage, I could have had quadriplegia. At first when the doctors gave me this news I was angry. I felt like I got away with it when others did not. It made me ask different questions about my life. Questions about my purpose; why did I survive and walk away from this accident? Then I remembered the promise I made to God; the promise that I would help. I knew my love and my compassion and understanding wasn't enough. I needed to come up with something that continued to give over and over again.

Then I remembered my cousin. When I was a child we used to go to my grandparents cottage, and my third cousin Tanya used a motorized wheelchair. Whenever she wanted to visit, her parents would use these portable little ramps that they would bring everywhere Tanya went. They would unfold the ramps and lay them over the few stairs or the curb, and up Tanya went. This gave me an idea. A big idea! Portable wheelchair ramps are the gift that keeps on giving.

Nobody knows exactly how often they will be used but I do! I watched my mother for more than 30 years struggle with accessibility issues. A pair of portable wheelchair ramps changes the game we call life. Ramps help an individual go to a neighbour's house for tea, they help a mother go to her daughter's wedding dress fitting, or help a daughter see a friend who just had a baby. Portable wheelchair ramps can mean that someone can visit a sick loved one in their home, or even have fun at someone else's cottage. You just never really know when the obstacle of stairs or a curb or lip in the road will show up. A portable ramp means that you always have some form of accessibility freedom. That is the gift that keeps on giving.

To my Mother, I give love and thanks. She is the one who taught me how to prevail over life's most fierce obstacles and to brave up to whatever comes your way. She taught me that there is grace in imperfection, and she taught me to see things in a different light; to understand what other people go through, and how to be kind and compassionate to others. She told me to believe there was a greater purpose for God's work, no matter how fierce it came. Without her lessons I would not be who I am today.

2016 was a breakthrough year for me. On June 2016, I founded Navy Street Charity. We donate portable wheelchair ramps to people who need them, and we are committed to the ultimate goal of providing ramps to all individuals touched by spinal cord injuries. My charity was created in honour of my mother who sustained paraplegia as a result of a medical accident 32 years ago, and is dedicated to my cousin Tanya who paved the way! We are starting to take flight and gaining awareness within the disability community. I see enormous potential, a clear path with a light that's as bright as ever.

For more information, visit www.navystreet.org.



Sandra's mother, Mary Longo.

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