

FEATURE





CHRISTINE CARON

STEPPING STONES *on the* ROAD TO FREEDOM

By Max Warfield

Four years ago, Christine Caron, a middle-aged Ottawa woman, saw life as she knew it shockingly transformed, but the monumental changes were not as tall as her towering spirit. In the swish of a dog's tail, she faced enormous medical adversities. "One word," she maintains, "got me through".

Family, sketching, running, yoga, studying hard for a job opportunity, a love of dancing and getting her hands dirty in the rich black soil of her garden filled her days with happiness. As did her dogs, until a commonplace incident left her devastated. Devastated, but far from out.

While playing tug-of-war with her four dogs, one of her Shitzus barely punctured her left hand with its teeth. Christine properly disinfected the wound. A nick that brought no pain or discolouration, she thought nothing further of it. However, all her loving

pets continued to lick the wound, perhaps sensing that she was already feeling physically low, unaware that she was fighting walking pneumonia.

It was this underlying condition of many months that agitated in the background, yet never ascended to a clear hazard. With her immune system depleted, she suffered a rare reaction to the bacteria capnocytophaga canimorsus, which rarely affects humans, and sepsis set in. Confused and ill, she was driven to a local emergency clinic, only to find the doors had been locked moments earlier.

"That evening was long. I was up most of the night with severe flu-like symptoms," Christine retells. On May 22, 2013, she walked into the local community emergency room, handed her health card to the nurse and collapsed.

She would remain in a coma for just under a month. On the 13th of June, 2013, she surmised the serious nature of her health. Doctors told her that portions of her face, her kidneys and all four of her limbs needed to be amputated to stay alive.



“BELIEVE is the word that has brought me through, my mantra, and my message. BELIEVE in whatever you BELIEVE in; BELIEVE in it wholeheartedly.”

“I have to be honest; I was suicidal,” she admits now, her beaming face forever hinting at a smile, and her comments always refreshingly blunt. “But then – like magic – my right arm improved. Vascular circulation could be heard and with that, the news that it would remain. I am right-handed, and that gave me the hope, the ray of sunshine I needed so desperately.”

Later that month, three limbs ravaged by the effects of sepsis were amputated, but her spirit remained bright, and she improved. The CN Tower could be called a “building”, Banff a “park”, or even the old Maple Leaf Gardens a “rink” and all would be somewhat accurate. But the terms would be inadequate, withholding an appreciation of those places, much like Christine’s adopted word that inspired her. It carried her through many surgeries and hundreds of painful dressing changes.

A survivor, Christine began her long road to recovery. Her mental viewpoint was crucial and she embraced a goal-oriented approach.

Her strategy was to focus on the near – the here and now.

“Baby steps”, as she refers to them. “Once the sepsis occurred, it became all about perspective, moving forward, and goals. It’s good to have an outlook for the long view, but that can provoke an anxiety attack! I have learned to focus on today and success in the short term. While in the hospital, I decided on important stepping stones: I would dance at my 50th birthday, I would make it home for Christmas, and I would later attend a family reunion in Florida. I worked hard in rehabilitation with these things in mind.”

The winter of 2015 proved to be grueling for her. Christine tried to set some goals, “but at home I wasn’t sure what was realistic. So, I made a list of activities that brought me joy in my prior life.” The list included yoga, painting and another one she had cherished since her teenage years: “Freedom is a full tank of gas! That’s what we used to say. I yearned to drive again. It clears my head.”

Help towards becoming a licensed driver again came from an unlikely source. “While initially recovering at a rehabilitation centre, an angel stepped into my life over coffee. She changed my world! Angela Clair from Spinal Cord Injury – Ontario had orchestrated some adaptations required to my home to make it safe and more accessible

for me. She stopped by to interview me for a project she was working on and took a look at my list. She gave me wings that day, telling me nothing was unattainable. Armed with her experience and determination, Angela helped me get the ball rolling for a few things I had listed, including my license to drive. I needed a modified vehicle, one the March of Dimes helped finance. Technicians from Liftability, who worked closely with my occupational therapist, Lynn Hunt, and the Ottawa Rehabilitation Centre, fabricated my controls. It was a really long process, but well worth it. I would sit for three hours at a time while they measured and adjusted and tested. It was a big project.”

The liberty to run errands at will and transport oneself independently does wonders for contentment, and re-attaining a license may not be as unthinkable for amputees as some people imagine.

“When I would bring up the idea, some said, ‘nuts!’ But with a family and my own appointments, I felt I had to drive again,” she says insistently. “And I succeeded, as I did with my other goals; well – except for that



“I have learned to focus on today... While in the hospital I decided on important stepping stones: I would dance at my 50th birthday... I would make it home for Christmas.”



‘flip-the-bird’ goal. I’m still working on that one.” Christine has been driving for two years now, keeping her road rage to herself – usually.

Most vehicles can be tailored to accommodate amputees, alterations for the operator to master controls previously out of reach. Christine’s includes a sleeve that holds her left upper arm. With a lever installed there, she manipulates it to serve as accelerator and brake. The headrest is fitted with devices to regulate her signals and windshield wipers. Her right hand works a knob on a revised steering wheel.

“I’ve been driving for a couple of years now and it makes a huge difference. I still don’t drive in the winter, though. It’s too much to get around in the snow and ice. I look forward to spring more than anyone!”



ADAPTING YOUR RIDE

Being safe behind the wheel is one of our most impactful responsibilities, as strict laws on sobriety and moving violations demonstrate. Our health can put our privilege to drive in jeopardy, as conditions such as seizures, sleeping disorders, diabetes, eye disease and dementia may result in the loss of a license. Drivers must carefully follow directions of any medications they might take to maintain alertness. With any medical issue affecting driving, doctors are required to report to the Ministry of Transportation. For an amputee, a new license holds this accountability, yet it is not as daunting

as some may worry. A few extra steps are involved.

If extensive modifications are needed to a vehicle, an evaluation is made by professionals. Assessments are available through rehabilitation centres and driving service providers, but be warned they can prove expensive, a point to research with your insurance coverage. Assessment centres may also have a waiting period, so it is recommended to make appointments early. Lessons may be needed if the adaptive controls are elaborate. A medical form may be required from your doctor.

Vehicle options are available to amputees that are wide and imaginative. Compensating controls may include reduced-effort steering, a spinner knob, a handle controlling brakes-horn-acceleration-lights, a left foot gas pedal, foot-operated steering, rings for prosthetic hooks, chest straps, head rests with controls, joysticks, as well as digital and touchpad steering. Any dashboard control may be consolidated and brought closer to the driver. A vehicle accommodating a wheelchair or scooter may be chosen.

Adaptations are as varied as individuals. When shopping for a new vehicle, keep in mind that rebates are offered by many manufacturers up to \$1,000 towards the needed steps. Standards of quality and function have been created, and those meeting these measures of excellence belong to an organization called the National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association.



Christine is now happy to be more mobile and independent. She speaks to groups as much as possible, a challenge from which she derives great pleasure.

"If my story teaches resilience, helps one person step out of the darkness or to overcome some form of adversity, I am more than willing to share it. Occasionally afterward, members of the audience will share with me how my story affected or influenced them. This is an amazing experience!"

Christine loves to paint, has returned to yoga – and thanks to The War Amps, has set her sights on her garden. She has highs after speaking events and lows on icy winter days. However, she tells us, "You have to maintain a good posture. Be like a flower, and put your face to the sun. Believe is the word that has brought me through, my mantra, and my message. Believe in whatever you believe in; believe in it wholeheartedly. Believe in magic and miracles. Believe

we are uprooted for a reason. Believe impossible is an opinion, and I believe somehow things will work out right."

To contact Christine, send an email to Christinecaronsmiles@gmail.com or visit her on Facebook @ChristineCaronSmile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Max Warfield was born in Ridgefield, Connecticut, now making his home on the southern shores of Lake Ontario. A correspondent for the *Lockport Union Sun & Journal* and the *Niagara Gazette*, Warfield has also written and published several novels.



"Freedom is a full tank of gas! That's what we used to say. I yearned to drive again. It clears my head."

Resources for a Return to Driving

www.waramps.ca

www.mto.gov.on.ca

www.oaac.ca

www.cdha.nshealth.ca

www.cdha.nshealth.ca/amputee-rehabilitation-musculoskeletal-program/driving

Assessment Centres

www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/safety/functional-assessment-centres.shtml

Companies Working with Amputee Drivers

www.lucanus.ca/Handicap_Driving_Aids.html

www.driverrehabtherapy.com

www.driveable.com

<https://mobilitybasics.ca>