

Loren & Tracy Bergen

On a drizzly Fraser Valley morning in early October 2004, 23-year-old Loren Bergen kissed his wife Tracy and his sons two-year-old Carson and one-year-old Jacob goodbye and left his Chilliwack home as usual for work at Kal Tire in Abbotsford.

Mid-morning, while fixing a tractor tire, Loren made a near-fatal error. Assuming the tire was too big, he opted not to place it in the safety cage -- a secured metal restraining device, designed to protect industry workers from injury during inflation.



Attaching the air hose, Loren was briefly distracted perhaps, he says, by a phone call. Turning back to the job, he noticed something was 'not quite right' with the tire and wheel assembly. As he reached to remove the air hose, the tire exploded, sending him spinning through the air and smashing every facial bone below his eyes.

Two firefighters close to the scene helped stabilize Loren until paramedics could transport him to New Westminster's Royal Columbian Hospital, where a specialized trauma team could work on severe injuries to his upper body.

Physicians warned Tracy that Loren might not live through the night. "When I saw him I was completely shocked," she recalls. "His head was swollen and bloody, about the size of a small pumpkin. I began talking to him and eventually he moved his foot, which they said was a good sign." While it meant Loren would probably survive, doctors were still not sure if he had suffered brain damage. With a broken disc in his neck, they feared he might not be able to raise his head. Miraculously there was no brain damage and in time the disc healed normally.

Five days later, Loren was transferred to Vancouver General Hospital. For Tracy, then 22, these first weeks were a complete blur. Her bedside vigil was supported by her husband's co-workers, supervisor -- even the company president -- who visited Loren throughout his convalescence.

Loren remembers nothing until he regained consciousness almost three weeks after the accident. Unable to speak, he would write on Tracy's hand with his index finger and she would guess the letters out loud.

As the days passed, the biggest concern was who would rebuild Loren's face. "Afterwards I learned several surgeons had said they didn't feel comfortable working on me: it was too challenging," says Loren. "One doctor described it as trying to work on a balloon filled with water with pieces of bone and teeth floating around in it." Eventually Vancouver cranial-facial specialist, Dr. Douglas Courtemanche, agreed to do the difficult reconstruction. "He said he felt completely comfortable working on Loren and that believe it or not, it wasn't the worst case he had ever seen," says Tracy. "I was so relieved: I was confident we were in good hands."

Loren who lost 50 pounds and 50 percent of his muscle mass during his hospitalization endured 40 hours of detailed surgery on his face, teeth, soft palate and tongue. Surgeons also repaired a severely shattered right elbow and a damaged nerve in his left shoulder.

Returning home after two-and-a-half months in hospital, Loren began his rehabilitation in earnest. Initially unable to maneuver his tongue, he found it hard to communicate and felt extremely self-conscious, something he still struggles with today. He underwent further surgery including a number of complex dental procedures and in the coming months he will work with a speech pathologist and undergo a final surgery on his palate.

A fit young man who loved to roughhouse with his sons and play basketball before his accident, Loren admits to fighting depression on his return home. "People expect you to be the way you were before, but you're different," he notes. "My kids wanted me to play and wrestle with them the way I used to and for as while I couldn't even lift my arms. When Tracy suggested I get some counseling we approached WorkSafeBC and a week later I had an appointment. People there have been great: I've had help whenever I've needed it."

Initially told he would not work for at least two years, Loren returned to light duty after only eight months. He credits his employer for encouraging him and for welcoming him back into the workplace, which was critical for his recovery. "Today I'm back doing heavier work and gradually regaining my confidence, he says. "One day I hope to move into management or commercial sales with the Kal Tire organization, which was where I was headed before my accident."

Loren, now 25, has an important message for other young workers. "Always follow safety procedures and never assume anything. After my accident, I learned that the tire I'd worked on that day did fit the safety cage. If I'd checked it out, if I'd been concentrating 100 percent on the task, this wouldn't have happened."