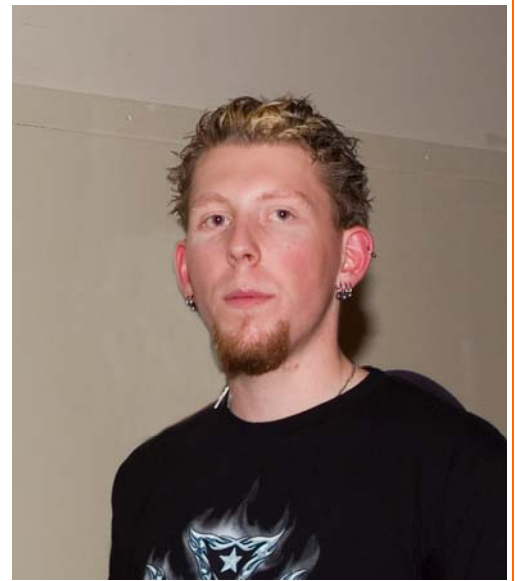


## **Nick Perry**

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



Four and a half years ago, when Nick was 19, he got a job at a Victoria lumberyard. "All the training I got was passed down from other workers," says Nick. "Also the only forklift training I received was that I was told where the gas and brakes were."

Nick had been working at the lumberyard for six 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 onto his back, driving him to the ground and doubling him forward at the waist. "The load hit me at such a velocity that it immediately broke my back and I just folded in half and lay under it on the ground," he says.

Nick was rushed to hospital and transferred to Vancouver where he had 13 ½ 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 weeks in hospital followed by three months in rehabilitation at GF Strong before returning home to Victoria.

At first, Nick was diagnosed with paraplegia, and thought he would never move his lower body again. He couldn't walk or do everyday things like dress himself. Then, with the combination of treatment and strong will, he was able to wiggle one big toe. It turned out that his spinal cord was not severed but had been severely crushed, leaving him with incomplete paraplegia.

After leaving GF Strong, Nick was admitted as an outpatient at the Gorge Road Hospital for six months of intense physiotherapy. After about one year, Nick was able to start walking again.

It took Nick a long time to get used to walking due to his nerve damage. Today, he is able to walk, but his life is not back to normal. He still doesn't have any feeling in his bladder, bowels, and in parts of his right foot. He also suffers from sexual dysfunction and atrophy in his left leg.

Nick's social life is a lot different now than before his accident. "I'm a young guy, and I feel like all this responsibility has been placed on me," he says. "I can't go and have fun like my buddies. I have a tube up my penis to pee. It makes me feel like I'm two years old."

While Nick is grateful for his miraculous physical improvements, he also faces new challenges. "When I am not in my chair, people can't easily tell that I am disabled," he says. "Sometimes I have to show people my brace or my scars so they believe that I really am a disabled man, which is frustrating."

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 has become more independent, but is no longer planning to move into his own apartment right now. He looks forward to going back to school, but knows that he won't be able to lead the life he had planned for himself.

"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."