



A joystick-based driving system has helped Piotr McKorcza gain independence for himself and his kids after he experienced a life-altering injury at work.

The road to recovery

By Kristine Carrick

Piotr McKorcza experienced a life-altering injury at work. But new technology has helped get him back behind the wheel and able to spend more time helping his kids get to their after school activities.

On December 6, 1996, on the way back from a painting job in Whistler, the driver of Piotr McKorcza's vehicle lost control of the car and ended up going under a logging truck that was parked on the side of the road.

"The roof of our car collapsed and I hit my head on the top of the roof and compressed my spine," says McKorcza. He was left with complete paralysis — something it took him a long time to come to terms with.

"You kind of have that hope in the back of your mind that things could change," he says. "I was hoping things would get better but not much has changed since then when it comes to movement and my physical improvements."

Regaining freedom

Years later, after his two children were born, the Vancouver resident needed care attendants or family members to drive when taking them anywhere in a car.

"There was always someone else there," he says. He had a wheelchair accessible van through WorkSafeBC, but he was always the passenger, never the driver.

That changed in 2019, when McKorcza and his WorkSafeBC case manager Claire Sanders began looking into options to get him behind the wheel again. Vancouver's GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre was able to connect him with Dean Robertson, a certified driver rehab specialist.

"As a certified driver rehab specialist, I work with people with disabilities and I either assess them for their driver fitness or for their vehicle needs." Robertson was the one to suggest using an emerging technology, the Joysteer Driving System. The technology is the only option that enables McKorcza to drive, and he's the first injured worker in B.C. to use it.

The Joysteer is a joystick that handles the acceleration, the brakes, and the steering in place of a traditional steering wheel and foot pedals. Robertson knew the technology existed, but would need to assess whether or not it would work for McKorcza.

"I not only did his driving evaluation to make sure that he was an appropriate candidate for the system, but

then I also became his driving instructor when I taught him how to drive using the Joysteer Driving System.”

To regain his driver’s licence, McKorcza persevered through intensive cognitive and competency testing, including driving lessons using the joystick technology.

The whole process took about six months, says Robertson. They started with one aspect of the joystick at a time, starting with braking and moving their way up to operating all functions at once in all driving situations from parking lots and parallel parking, to highways and busy intersections.

Being behind the wheel for the first time since his injury was difficult, he says. But McKorcza was determined to keep going: “I needed to get this done for my kids.”

Connecting with his kids

One of the things that has changed is the trip to and from school or summer activities with his kids. Instead of needing to coordinate attendants or call on family, McKorcza handles it by himself, thanks to his new van.

“Now I get that 15 to 20 minutes when we are one-on-one,” he says. “It was all new to me. I’m really enjoying that.” The single father loves being “Dad’s taxi” for his son, 14, and daughter, 11. He’s able to drive them to their many activities and cheer them on from the sidelines.

That freedom is life-changing, says McKorcza, 50. “The most important thing I wanted was to be independent. I don’t need to ask anyone for help to get in or out of [the van], or to use it.”

The van has given him more confidence and freedom in his personal life too. He’s more social thanks to the increased mobility, he says. “My thinking opened up. The car allows me to meet more people.” Those benefits are crucial for seriously injured workers. Post-injury independence and social connection have a positive impact on their physical, emotional, and mental health.

Sanders hopes the technology will help other injured workers as well. “I think it would be amazing for a lot of people to have the independence that Piotr now has to get back to driving and I think if the technology is now starting to catch up we’re going to see it much more.” ☺



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