

One Client's Journey: Tom Kulback

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It was April 4th 2003, at 10 o'clock at night, when the phone rang at Priscilla Kulback's home. It was the phone call no parent imagines - for which no parent is prepared. Her 26 year old son Tom had been injured at work. He was a baggage handler at Northwest Airlines, where his father Tom Sr. also works. On the night he was injured the conditions were formidable - it was dark, sleeting and visibility was very poor. Tom doesn't remember being hit by the de-icing truck. And for some period of time many coworkers thought that it was Tom Sr. who had been hurt, because Tom Jr. was known by everyone as "Junior." It wasn't until a coworker posted a picture of Tom Jr. on a hangar bulletin board that his coworkers realized that it was in fact he who had been injured.

When Tom was hit by the truck he suffered a frontal lobe injury and pulmonary failure. He was emergently taken to Annapolis Hospital where he was intubated, and then was transferred via survival flight to the University of Michigan Hospital. He was in critical condition and the situation was grave. On Sunday, less than two days after the accident, his family priest visited to give Tom his last rites. He was put on a respirator because he could not breathe on his own, and he had a tube inserted to provide him with nourishment.

He survived the tenuous first days, which Priscilla recalled with tears in her eyes. For 21 days Tom remained on the respirator. For Priscilla and the rest of Tom's family, not knowing what to expect was the hardest part. As she described the experience, "it was one step forward, two steps back." What they did know was that Tom had a brain injury. What they didn't know was whether Tom would be able to walk or talk or feed himself when he woke up. His doctors told the family that because of the site of his injury - the frontal lobe area - that it was very possible the injury could have a profound impact on his personality.

While Tom was in the hospital, his mother kept a notebook on his recovery. When family and friends and coworkers from Northwest came to visit they would write in the notebook. His sister Melissa and her husband Bob drove from Indiana on weekends to be with Tom. For the Kulbacks, the steady stream of visitors was a tremendous support to them, as was their faith in God. Tom began to improve - he came off the respirator, slowly started walking a little more of the hospital hallways every day. His first taste of food after the accident was yogurt - a food Tom didn't particularly like before that moment. He now likes yogurt, so long as it's blueberry.

During Tom's acute stay, his physicians told him that for the type of injury he sustained, recovery time was usually 9-12 months or more. Tom had no intentions of taking that long to recover, and as he recalled "I set a goal of six months, and I intended to meet it."

While in the hospital, Tom was making progress in Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy and Speech Therapy. And it was soon time for him to move on. Priscilla noted that "the doctors told us it was time for Tom to move to post acute care. We had no idea what that meant. So we started to look at brochures and interview companies." After much research, the Kulbacks chose Rainbow. In May of 2003, Tom moved to Bemis House, a facility geared toward active rehabilitation, with staffing levels designed to provide structure and support for residents.

He participated in daily therapy, with many sessions attended by Priscilla, despite having to continue to run her day-care center. Having his mom participate was important and was a tremendous support. Priscilla was able to attend Tom's treatment in large part due to the kindness of others. Tom and Priscilla acknowledged with deep gratitude the many friends and fellow church members who helped them through Tom's recovery. Friends helped with the running of the day-care, and many people from their church provided meals for the family.

For Tom, the transition to Bemis was tough. He had lived on his own for the previous four years, and was used to being, well, independent. So, coming to a home where structure is built in to the daily regimen was difficult for him. He spent a total of 5 1/2 half weeks there, and was progressing quickly. It was soon time for the next step and Tom moved on to Parkview, which is the transition home to the Semi-Independent Apartment Program. While at Parkview, Tom began to attend the groups at the Apartment Program. He appreciated the increased

levels of independence that Parkview provided. With the guidance of his treatment team, he was getting back into the swing of cooking his own meals, doing his own laundry and participating in therapy with a group of his peers. When asked what he enjoyed best about his experience with the groups, Tom felt that "meeting the other clients - learning how they got to Rainbow and hearing their stories" was very rewarding.

Tom was doing well with the greater level of independence that Parkview house provided, and was soon ready to move to the Ann Arbor Apartment program. So well in fact that he took the very difficult step of informing his mom that she didn't need to attend his therapy sessions any more. It was hard for her to take that step back, but at the same time, she knew that meant Tom was progressing and that the change was a positive one. Tom moved into a Townhouse he shared with another client, and continued to participate in individual therapy and the groups with the other clients in the program. He also began the steps necessary to begin the path of returning to work - to the position he had when his accident occurred. Like the goal he set for recovery - return to work was an equally important goal. Nothing short of returning to work was acceptable.

With a lot of work, and a lot of support and challenging by his treatment team members, Tom was on his way toward his two main goals - return to home, and return to work. Tom discharged from Rainbow on September 5, 2003, well in advance of the 6 month goal he had set. With his first goal having been met, the next step was return to work at Northwest.

When Tom first went back to work, he needed to begin with light duty to slowly acclimate himself back into his job. As time passed on light duty, Tom became increasingly frustrated, wanting to get back to his former job. To help deal with the desire to return to work, Tom continued to receive support from his treatment team.

After some time Tom was ready to return to his former job, which he continues today. When asked what his fondest memory of Rainbow was, he took some time before answering half in jest, and half with quite sincerity "the day I left." He explained further that he very much enjoyed meeting the staff and his treatment team members. "They were fun to be around." But he also was committed to his goal of moving back to home within six months of his accident, and so leaving Rainbow was indeed a major success for Tom. For his mother, her fondest memories were of the staff as well. "The professionalism was what I enjoyed - the therapists did their jobs and made it fun. Everyone welcomed us. Working with Jenny D'Angela, Tom's Case Manager, was just a pleasure."

Tom and his mom were also asked what the biggest changes were as a result of the accident. Priscilla felt that Tom came through a much more mature young man with a better understanding of commitments and new appreciation for finances. But she is most happy with what she feels didn't change - her son's personality. Despite the injury he sustained she feels that Tom retained his best trait - his fun loving demeanor. Tom feels the same. And he added that "through this experience I don't want to go through life being mad - I want people to remember me as a fun loving guy- someone who could make people laugh. I live life one day at a time, and if every day I can make one person happy then I am happy." Perhaps Tom's story can do just that . . .

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