

Portrait of an Injured Soldier

An Interview with Matthew Drake

I am different than most people. I'm different than I was before.

I talk differently. I walk differently.

My memory? It's pretty lousy sometimes.

If you challenged me to a race, I would lose big time!

Would that make me a loser?

I don't think so. I am a winner every day that I don't quit.

*The only race I'm in, the only competition that matters,
is the challenge I make to myself.*

Every day I try to work hard at being the best I can be!

*-Matthew Drake, Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, while
speaking to students at a local middle school*

When retired U.S. Army Spc. Matthew Drake speaks to children and teens at local elementary and middle schools, he reminds them that life is all about choices. *"Whether you make a positive difference or a negative one is up to you,"* he said. *"In this country you have the freedom to be whatever you want to be, whoever you want to be. I fought for that freedom."*

It's a message that Matthew takes to heart. The past four years have not been easy for him or his family, and choosing to have a good attitude has been a true test of character. The 24-year-old Ohio native is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom who was seriously wounded during a suicide car bombing in October of 2004. Of the four men he was with in the vehicle that day, Matthew was the lone survivor, and it has profoundly impacted the way he lives.

His struggle to recover has been a tribute to those he lost, and his commitment to become the very best man he can be has been his way of honoring their memory.

Injured in Iraq

Matthew's recovery has been a literal journey back from the brink of death. At the time of the bombing, his injuries were extensive — critical scalp, skull and brain injuries; multiple fractures, including a spinal fracture; and first, second and third degree burns on his hand and legs. His lungs were damaged by the explosion, and shrapnel was embedded in his head, face, neck and throat. In addition, he faced bacterial and viral infections resulting from his injuries.

In a coma and on life support, the prognosis was grim. Brain and skull surgery was immediately performed by a neurosurgeon



at the army hospital in Baghdad before he was transported to the army's Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. During the trip, he nearly died of a massive stroke. When he arrived at Landstuhl, they prepared to send him to a nearby hospital skilled in treating soldiers with head injuries, but the hospital declined to take him, concerned he would not survive the move.

A determined American doctor refused to take no for an answer. He contacted a physician at the German military hospital in Koblenz (*the equivalent of Walter Reed*) over two hours away. He agreed to come and examine Matthew. The physician treated him and arranged for a German Army helicopter to transport Matthew to Koblenz's ICU.

In the meantime, the Army notified Matthew's parents to be on a plane departing for Germany in three hours. His mother, Lisa Shuster, recalls the devastating phone call from the Army representative who advised her, *"Ma'am, I suggest you make that plane."*

Matthew underwent several surgeries in Koblenz before he was stable enough to be transported to the intensive care unit at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. His mother stayed by his side and accompanied him back to the United States. The long-term prognosis was not good. The brain injury he sustained

Matthew Drake *continued*

would require long-term rehabilitation, and doctors predicted that Matthew would be severely disabled for life.

Friends and Family Rally

The news was devastating for Matthew's family, but friends and extended family rallied around them and let them know they were ready to offer support. It was encouragement the family desperately needed in order to stay positive.

"The best phone messages," said Lisa, *"were the ones saying, 'Don't worry about calling me back. I just want you to know I'm here. I'm praying. If you need me, call.'"*

Rehabilitation Begins

Bedside rehabilitation began in December. Therapists stretched Matthew's arms, legs, hands and feet, retraining them to work. Progress was slow. It was not until January, almost three months after his accident, that Matthew spoke for the first time.

"When he first woke up, none of his body parts worked at all," said Lisa. *"The only thing he could do was move his eyes and his left hand, and that was it. He literally woke up body part by part."*

Gradually, over months of therapy, Matthew regained control of his body. He began walking with assistance. Although his legs were not injured, he struggled with balance and experienced uncontrollable shaking and tremors in his hands and arms. He also faced challenges related to his short-term memory, unable to recall things that had occurred just minutes earlier.

In November 2005, Matthew finally moved home after family, friends and neighbors raised funds and volunteered their time to build an 800-square-foot addition to his mother's house. The addition was designed to meet his needs and included ramps and widened doorways to accommodate his wheelchair. He lived with his mother for a little over a year and received outpatient therapies at a local rehabilitation facility.

He would face many more months of therapy over the next three years, transferring in and out of several rehabilitation facilities as he progressed.

Matthew Today

Today, Matthew is a living testament to what dedication and hard work can accomplish. He is participating in Rainbow Rehabilitation Center's Semi-Independent Living Program where he resides in his own apartment.

Although he still faces deficits resulting from his brain injury and requires the support of an aide, Matthew has learned

compensatory strategies that help him maintain an active lifestyle. He uses Microsoft Outlook to plan his week and makes a detailed daily schedule. Each night he finalizes the schedule and prints a copy to carry with him the next day.

Because of his short-term memory problems, each hour is planned out. He checks items off as he completes them to prevent him from repeating them a second time. Matthew also programs the alarm on his watch to remind him to take his medication or to remember important appointments.

"A lot of what is essential in order for Matthew's strategies to be successful is routine," said Lisa. *"That's probably the number one factor for him to be independent. Once he learns a routine, he's pretty good at it and can manage it on his own. So, the schedule is part of his daily routine. It gives him his freedom."*

Since his injury, Matthew has found that it is sometimes difficult to control his feelings of frustration and anger. He has been implementing strategies he learned in therapy to identify and avoid situations that trigger those feelings and to recognize when he is escalating so that he can regroup. He has made great strides in learning how to handle his anger in very appropriate ways.

Back to Work

For a young man who could not walk or even talk after his accident, Matthew's progress has been remarkable. Not only does he manage his own schedule, he also works in the clothing room at the local VA for two hours each weekday, sorting donations of clothes. He sizes and organizes the items and distributes them when military personnel or their families come in with a voucher. His responsibilities were also recently expanded to include assembling wheelchairs. As he progresses in his rehabilitation, he hopes to one day return to school to continue his education.

But what Matthew is really passionate about is speaking to children and teens at local schools as well as addressing local church, community and veterans' groups. He was a sought-after speaker for several Memorial Day events. The message he shares with his audiences is one of inspiration and hope, especially for young people. He encourages them to make good choices and to value who they are.

Faith and Family

As his mother reflects upon the past four years, she stresses that the family's faith is what sustained them.

"One of God's greatest gifts to Matt and me and our family is a sense of humor," said Lisa. *"I count that as part of faith because in*

Matthew Drake *continued*

order to laugh you have to have hope, and in order to have hope, you have to have faith in God."

Perhaps the greatest triumph of all is the way Matthew has taken a difficult situation in his own life and used it to benefit others.

"Life handed Matt a great big lemon," said Lisa. "He can be sour and bitter, or he can make lemonade. Matt's taken something bad and is turning it around into something sweet and good. He can make a tremendous impact." ❖

Written by Kirstin Olmstead, RainbowVisions Staff Writer;
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