

Once thought paralyzed, Connelly walks back to work with support from VML Insurance Programs

By: Hollie Cammarassana, Director of Communications

At approximately 2 a.m. on January 15, 2005 John Connelly, night shift manager at the Upper Occoquan Service Authority (UOSA) in Centreville, Virginia, reached into a water tank to clean off a probe that was causing an alarm to go off when nothing was wrong. As he stood on a ladder holding an extension rod, he felt a sharp jolt-like gripping pain in his mid-back.

Within 24 hours, John could no longer walk.

It was determined that John had suffered a compressed spinal cord injury, caused by a calcified disc herniation. At the time his diagnosis stated that he had permanent paralysis and would “be a paraplegic for life.”

At the time of the accident John was 44 years old, had two sons – Jeb, eleven and Sam, eight. He was active with fishing, hunting, canoeing, kayaking, and playing ball with his kids. He had worked at UOSA for 23 years.



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Patient advocates key toward recovery

For five years John Connelly maintained contact with Lee Bank, his patient advocate, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly, sometimes monthly. Whenever John faced an issue or obstacle, Lee was there. Whenever a medical issue needed additional research or doctors needed to be consulted, Lee was there.

VML Insurance Programs has been providing patient advocates for injured member employees for 30 years. Currently two registered nurses experienced and trained in the occupational health field are on-staff patient advocates – Lee Bank and Kathy Foulk.

Their job is to advocate for injured workers. They assist injured employees through the initial evaluation process, subsequent recovery, and work with both the employee and employer to ensure safe and timely return-to-work.

Patient advocates are often assigned to catastrophic and complex cases, such as John's. Their responsibilities are varied and include developing medical assessments, ensuring medical progress, reviewing requests for treatment, assisting with a return to work program, and much more.

“Having patient advocates is another way we are adding value to membership with VML Insurance Programs,” said Robin Duvall, director of Workers' Compensation Claims. “They are a critical part of the recovery process for many injured workers – helping them understand the medical terminology and going with them throughout the process of getting better.”

For more information visit: www.vmlins.org.



Deborah Briggs, senior claims representative with VML Insurance Programs, was John's first contact with the pool after his injury.

“From the hospital he was saying how determined he was to walk again, to work again, and be an active father to his children again,” she said.

Remarkably two and a half years later John did just that.

Determination

“Two things really motivated me,” said John. “The kids, you don't want them to be cheated out of what they have, and you want to get back to work. I was driven to get back to where I was.”

John's employer, UOSA, has workers' compensation coverage through VML Insurance Programs. Soon after his injury he began a year-long stretch of at-home and out-patient physical therapy. In May, three months after the injury, John was able to move his right foot.

This was the first sign of hope.

Lee Bank, senior patient advocate with VML Insurance Programs, was assigned John's case.

Patient advocates like Lee provide injured workers with comprehensive injury and treatment assessments – helping the worker and the claims representative to maximize potential outcomes.

“John was motivated to do everything and anything he could to maximize his recovery,” said Lee. “He joined a support group, did a lot of internet research, and turned his basement into a gym – and he kept asking when he could move on to the next step.”

Nearly a year after his accident Lee approved John for an eight-week in-patient stay at the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center (WWRC) in Fishersville, Virginia. The facility has extensive experience and expertise in spinal cord injury rehabilitation.

Days before his admission to WWRC as they were waiting for repairs to be made to his wheelchair, John told Lee that they may not need to have to spend money on the repairs since he took five steps the day before with both of his legs.

“He said it so matter-of-factly that I was the one who was more excited, and he was already on to what’s next,” said Lee.

He left for WWRC with a plan of action and a list of things he wanted to get accomplished.

“Approval for Woodrow was a huge commitment from VML Insurance Programs,” said John. “That’s when I knew that they had confidence in me, that it was time to get with it, I know that a lot of companies wouldn’t do that so I had to take it and go.”

John arrived at WWRC with the ability to walk 50 feet at a time with a walker and moderate help from a therapist. His primary physical therapist Kate Baxter, senior physical therapist with WWRC, recalls John’s commitment and dedication toward recovery.

“Most of our patients are approved for two hours of therapy per day,” said Kate. “John was approved for three, and on top of that he took it upon himself to exercise on his own for an additional three hours each day, whether it was on the mat, the recumbent bike, or working on upper body strengthening.”

After the first four weeks of therapy, John’s walking distance had progressed from 50 to 310 feet, and he made measurable strength gains in 11 out of 18 lower extremity muscle groups.

“With an incomplete injury like John’s sometimes after the first year you have recovered and maximized all that you are going to get, and other times its just the beginning,” said Kate. “For John this

progress showed that he was still recovering neurologically and he responded well to a regimented exercise program.”

With his progress noted, John’s eight-week approval was extended.

“As long as I could see improvement and something to push for I was willing to stay,” said John. “It wasn’t fun being there but I knew it was my best chance.”

By the time he was discharged he would spend a total of 16 months at the center rehabilitating.

Moving forward



John frequently looked forward, rarely looking back to see how far he had come.

“At the end of each therapy session he’d want to analyze – what can we work on, what can we do better, what can I do to get better,” said Kate. “This drive is what really helped him – he progressed so much that we were constantly looking at new and different types of bracing for his legs.”

John’s goals – to get back to work, to get back home, to get his life back as close to “normal” as possible - motivated him to focus on what needed work and served as an inspiration to others in the center. As many patients came and went, John continued to work hard and encourage others to do more than they thought they could.

“His ‘this won’t get me down attitude’ is just inspirational, it says so much about his values,” said Lee.



By planning ahead John was able to walk on the beach - in sandals.

In addition to physical therapy John worked closely with occupational therapists to plan for returning home and to work.

“John’s motto was don’t sell me short just because I can do something from the wheelchair, I want to do it as close as possible to how I did it before the injury,” said Kate.

He worked closely with his therapists to prepare for the day-to-day activities he would face at home and at work, problem solving ways to get around and do things as normally as possible.

According to Kate, John was “really good at seeing outside the four-walls of rehab and into the real world, he would say ‘okay that works here but when I go to work how am I going to do this, or when I’m on vacation how am I going to do that, and what equipment will work for this?’”

He went home each weekend to spend time with his wife and children, take care of as many chores and errands as possible and try to alleviate some of the stress faced by his wife Nina.

“I wanted to try to give everyone as much of a normal life as possible, I didn’t want this to change their activities, their school, I wanted to keep them on schedule,” said John.

That August John took two weeks off from

therapy for a family beach vacation. In preparation he decided he needed to find a way to walk on the beach... in sandals.

“John was thinking about heading to the beach and he said, ‘I need to figure out how to wear sandals with this ugly brace,’” recalls Kate.

John brought a pair of TEVA sandals to his Orthotist and had a receiver put in that his brace could connect to.

“His thought was, just because I have this injury doesn’t mean I have to wear tennis shoes to the beach, and that’s just John, just ‘let me be as normal as I can be.’”

On top of that, he’d thought ahead about ensuring that the tips of his walker wouldn’t sink into the sand. He worked with his team at WWRC to make a “beach walker” using removable PVC end caps on the walker legs to prevent the ends from sinking into the sand.

John also participated in activities put together at Smith Mountain Lake for individuals with disabilities including spinal cord injuries, brain injury, cerebral palsy and more. Participants were able to choose from several sports such as waterskiing, kayaking, and scuba diving, made possible with adaptive equipment on-site. John chose kayaking.

In July, 2007 the decision was made to discharge John from WWRC.

“You know it’s tough on someone who has a family, who has a job, to decide if they should go back to home now where they are, or try to keep rehabbing a few more months and see what happens,” said Kate.

However the team determined that he no longer needed intense daily physical and occupational therapy, and that he would move to monthly visits for six months as he returned back into life, work, and family.

Return to UOSA



“John’s job wasn’t going anywhere,” said Jack Sellman, director of the Division of Treatment Process at UOSA, and John’s manager. “When he came back it was part time, we didn’t want to push him – we didn’t want to push him to the point where he would fail, we wanted him to succeed.”

For the two and a half years that John was in rehabilitation Lee kept Jack updated on his improvement.

“Lee was great in keeping me updated – every month she’d update me on what was going on, what the plans were, what the treatment strategies were that they were using to help him out,” said Jack.

For two and a half years UOSA left John’s job open.

He returned gradually, first working from home as a way to keep up with changes going on at the plant. Then, after a visit from Kate and occupational therapist Sonya Gasser, accessibility changes were made at UOSA to allow him to come back to work for four-hour days a few times a week until he worked his way up to eight hours.

“We were able to make some modifications to get him into his work area, but he was so far ahead he didn’t need some of the things we did,” said Jack. “They brought him here, took him through the paces, took him up some stairs – that blew me away. That’s when we had a comfort level that he was ready to come back.”

After his injury John initially remained adamant that he’d resume the duties he had before he was injured as the manager of the midnight to 8 a.m. shift. However a new role came along that was better suited for John’s return – a day shift position which would be less grueling and allow him to spend more time with his wife and children.

Today John is in charge of writing the standard operating procedures for the plant. He has to write in detail so that anyone could come in and perform tasks consistently based off the procedures. John’s work is also used in training.

In order to effectively write the procedures John needed help accessing several parts of the plant.

“Sometimes to write about it you really have to get a visual idea of what is changing, I have to get my facts straight or someone may make a mistake or get injured, so it’s important that I can get around fully,” said John.

In response VML Insurance Programs purchased a scooter for John’s use at the plant.

“Anything that John needed, Lee was able to get him, like the scooter that gives him the mobility to help him in his job,” said Jack. “I can’t say enough things about how VML Insurance Programs has helped John and gotten him back to us.”

After several months back at work John headed back to WWRC to get more help in

assimilating to his new work environment.

“There were some things I was struggling with and we worked on those issues, when I came back I felt stronger and more motivated than before,” said John.

Additional surgery

Even though John has made incredible improvements, he suffers from uncontrollable leg spasms that make walking difficult and exhausting.

VML Insurance Programs paid for John to be examined at a special lab at the University of Virginia to have his gait measured through computer imagery.

He recently met for a surgical consultation for possible work on his left foot and ankle to improve his gait and range of motion in his ankle.

If he moves forward with the surgery it will require additional physical therapy.

Teamwork



John and his patient Advocate, Lee Bank

John knows that for him to continue to progress communication is key.

“I took this as a team project – I had to do my part, workers’ compensation did their part, the doctors and physical and occupational therapists did theirs,” said John. “I couldn’t do it by myself, I didn’t know how.”

John says that communicating effectively,

utilizing the experience and expertise available to him, working diligently and paying attention helped his recovery.

“It was important to keep everyone in the loop – my boss, Lee, the doctors, to get the support of everyone on board.”

In the five years they have worked together, speaking daily, weekly or monthly, John and Lee had never met until September 3, 2010. Lee accompanied John to his recent surgical consultation so that she can understand the procedure and what to expect.

“It was like meeting an old friend that day,” said Lee. “We recognized each other getting off the elevator and just started talking as if we’d just seen each other the day before!”

“Meeting Lee for the first time was like coming full circle,” said John. “From the first conversations we had on the phone to planning out a path of recovery, it was like meeting an old friend and catching up.”

Kate, who has also not met Lee, says that she would know her from her voice if she walked into the center today. “She was so involved, she was always looking for the best for him but was also very realistic, she wasn’t afraid to raise the ‘what ifs’ and she really listened to what we had to say,” she said.

Future

While John will always have to work with his disability, which will require bracing and either canes or crutches, Lee is confident that he will continue to progress.

“His can-do attitude is unbelievable,” said Lee. “I’m sure each day brings its challenges and problems but he just does not let it get him down, it has been a pleasure to work with him and it is an honor just to know him.”

Deborah, who has also worked closely with John throughout the past five years, concurs.

“He is an inspiration to everyone here at VML Insurance Programs and just an amazing person for having the courage and determination to never give up,” she said.



Today John is again active in his children's lives, going to hockey games, fishing down by the Upper Occoquan reservoir, kayaking, playing miniature golf and even chopping wood.

VML Insurance Programs Managing Director Steve Craig says that John's story exemplifies one of the main reasons the pool exists.

"At the end of the day helping people is why we are here," said Steve. "It is especially meaningful to work with individuals like John Connelly and organizations like UOSA."

"We will continue to do whatever we can to help him in his journey to have the most fulfilling life he can have with his wife, children and work," said Steve.

John admits that life after a spinal cord injury is difficult, but says its doable.

"My job, my family, my faith and my friends are the focus of my days, not staring out the window and wishing for what I don't have," said John.

"I know my mind and heart didn't die because my body failed me. Life can leave you behind, or you can catch back up and live it again. "

"Lee, Deborah and the VML Insurance Programs teams gave me the chance to do that." ■

Return to Work programs

No one would have expected John Connelly to return to work, except John Connelly. His injury was so severe that it was expected he would be a "perm total" case, requiring lifetime wage and medical benefits. However thanks to strength, determination, and a strong team he has resumed modified duty with UOSA.

However, for many with lesser injuries a transition back to pre-injury work through modified duty – may benefit both employee and employer, and reduce workers' compensation costs.

Studies have shown if an employee does not return to work within two weeks following an injury, the probability of return to work at their pre-injury job is greatly reduced. This is because during extensive medical leave from work physical conditioning is lost, making injured employees more susceptible to re-entry injuries when returning to work at their pre-injury job.

By returning to work earlier through light or modified duty this risk is reduced, employee morale not just for the injured worker, but for all employees, is raised, and the employer benefits from regaining their knowledge base faster.

VML Insurance Programs can help you develop a Return To Work program. For more information contact patient advocates at (800) 963-6800 or via e-mail at: lbank@vmlins.org or kfoulk@vmlins.org.