

Features

"There's no time for a usual life"

Patterning: a chance to walk again

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"I want to be a person like somebody else was once."

—From *Kaspar* by Peter Handke

April 1981: Steven Sieber sits in his den, glancing sheepishly at the flickering light beaming from his television. There's a few minutes left, until the pattern begins and he's quietly savouring those quintessential shreds of free time.

At twenty five years of age, Sieber is a tall, lanky man whose straggly split ends, pencil thin moustache, and mild-mannered appearance are all perfectly normal. But his waist is about half the size it should be, and he experiences constant tremors. When he speaks, he breathes out too much air, and the resulting sound echoes that of John Merrick's Elephant Man patter. You know, "My head feels so big, because there are so many dreams inside of it."

June 1977: Steven has recently completed his second year as a student at the University of Toronto. Growing up, he had always been hooked on science, so when he enrolled in university he chose computer science and had shown excellent promise. That summer he took on a part-time job; another in a long line. One day on his way to work, he stepped off the curb and that was it. The next thing he'd remember would be walking up in the Old Queen Elizabeth, feeling as if he had been sleeping.

Sieber had been hit by a car and the accident was serious.

"I got a call early in the morning, and an early morning phone call is usually very bad," says Helen Sieber, Steven's petite,

Nightmare

but iron-willed mother. "They said Steven had been in an accident. He was taken to the York Finch General Hospital, but they didn't have facilities for brain damage, so he was transferred to Humber Memorial.

"We had to go there to identify him. He looked like he was sleeping. We didn't know whether he'd pull through. In fact, we had to wait nine days now knowing if he'd survive. It was a nightmare, a devastation of the whole family."

Steven was in a coma for three-and-a-half months. The first 32 of those days were spent at Humber Memorial, then he was

transferred to the Old Queen Elizabeth, because she found the conditions to be intolerable. Mrs. Sieber fought to transfer her son to The Baycrest Hospital, a better equipped facility.

Helen and Max Sieber visited their son every day. The doctors said they doubted he would regain consciousness; if he did, they said he'd be a vegetable, "a nothing".

"They were saying such terrible things. I couldn't believe them. It may sound ridiculous, but I didn't give up hope," says Mrs. Sieber.

When Steven finally regained consciousness he couldn't recall the accident. He thought he was ready to go to work. He tried to move, but his legs

Yom Kippur

disobeyed him; he tried to call out, but silence spoke instead.

"He woke up the weekend of Yom Kippur (the highest Jewish holiday)," remembers Mrs. Sieber. "He had been hovering above death, but on Friday evening I noticed something. I noticed more on Saturday. I was convinced on Sunday he was awake. The nurses didn't believe me. But I got a call at work on Monday saying that he was awake."

Steven awoke in the Old Queen Elizabeth, a hospital which he refers to as "the Don Jail without bars". He managed to survive it until December 27, when he was finally transferred to Baycrest.

Steven's most vivid memory of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital is his first therapy which he calls "The Rack". They strapped him down on a tiltboard and stood him at a ninety degree angle.

Though the Baycrest proved to be a number of steps upward, both in terms of atmosphere and conditions, Steven wanted to be somewhere else. "I was in there for 23 months. I learned all about moaning and groaning from the elderly patients," he says.

"He typed letters to the director of Baycrest complaining about the food," says Mrs. Sieber. "Eventually he got so mad, that one day he pulled a bar from the wall."

November 1979: Steven was finally released because there was nothing more than could be done for him. Still, he was in no condition to go home because he had to have constant care. It was assumed that the next step for Steven would be



Steven Sieber masking his way towards recovery.

permanent institutionalization. Mrs. Sieber, however, defied the obvious course for her son and took him home. Steven became the focal point of the household.

"I just couldn't accept the fact that he was going to be the way they said he would be," says Mrs. Sieber, staring intently at her son.

"It's ironic," she adds, "but here's a kid who was practically on his own. He had made a trip to Europe and Israel. He had travelled halfway around the world and he comes home and gets hit by a car and nearly dies."

Steven was taken to a top neurosurgeon, Tom Morely of Toronto General Hospital, who claimed that Steven's intelligence hadn't been affected and that he would grow as any other person as his life progressed.

During the first few months at home, Steven spent most of his time travelling to the New Queen Elizabeth hospital for therapy three days a week and to Humber College for a computer course. According

to Mrs. Sieber however, the therapy didn't do much good.

Even before Steven's accident, Mrs. Sieber had heard about a program called "Patterning", used primarily on the brain-injured. Patterning is supposed to stimulate the inactive part of the brain. And part of the process is akin to the crawling or creeping motions practised by a normal five-month-old baby.

Patterning was and still is considered

Patterning

controversial. Critics like the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy had stated that the efficacy of patterning had not been proven scientifically; others claimed that the changes attributed to patterning could be spontaneous or due to normal development.

Mrs. Sieber contacted a woman who patterned her brain damaged son. She also called B'nai B'rith Women's Organization, which had introduced patterning into Canada ten years ago. And she finally contacted the Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential, in Philadelphia, the leading advocates of patterning.

"The Institute is tough," says Steven. "They gave me a plan and told me I could go home and either follow it, or not follow it. It was up to me. They also warned me that there are no guarantees. For every person it works for, there's one it doesn't work on."

When he arrived home from his first visit, he discarded the wheelchair. Then they began the program. "Steven had no choice. The program was forced on him," says his mother.

April 1980: Steven's day begins at 7:45 a.m. he is awakened from his mattress on the floor. At 9:30 he begins his first exercise. His routines consist of hanging and stretching for up to 10 minutes, twenty times a day from a horizontal ladder hung parallel to the ceiling. Eventually, he wants to walk hand-over-hand on the ladder.

Creeping is done one quarter mile each day, five days a week. (Creeping is done on the hands and knees and is different from crawling). He has to creep 30 feet as fast as he can sprint. There are also marathon creeping sessions, where he has worked up to a mile. They have a 54 foot 'track' in the living room, and he creeps everywhere in the house. For larger sessions they go to a



A session of patterning. The volunteers try to establish a rhythm so the exercise doesn't become monotonous.

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