



Baby Steps

A LOUD CRASH SLICED THROUGH THE SUMMER AIR, MARKING A LIFE-ALTERING EVENT. THE PARAMEDICS BELIEVED THE BURNED, BROKEN AND MANGLED DRIVER WAS DEAD AFTER RESCUING HIS BODY FROM THE FLAMING VEHICLE, UNCONSCIOUS AND WITHOUT A PULSE. ALTHOUGH NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE PRESERVED DAVID NORCOTT, HIS INSPIRING DETERMINATION GAVE HIM THE STRENGTH TO ENDURE A LONG RECOVERY FETTERED WITH DOUBTS BUT RESULTING IN TRIUMPH.

story by GAIL BENNISON *photography by* JEREMY ENLOW

Benbrook resident David Norcott says that for the last six years, he has lived his life “post-mortem.” Through all the trials and tribulations, the 37-year-old bilateral amputee has a life, a wife and a future. It wasn’t always that way. ¶ He has no recollection of the catastrophic accident that caused cardiac arrest, a “closed head” brain injury, an ascending aortic aneurysm, multiple fractures, collapsed lungs, a ruptured spleen, and multiple third- and fourth-degree burns, which led to the amputations of both legs above the knee.

He does recall having a heated argument with a girlfriend and leaving the Eagle Mountain Lake area angry and upset on the evening of Sept. 2, 1998. Driving with excessive speed on Boat Club Road, Norcott crashed his Chevrolet Monte Carlo head-on into another vehicle, leaving him trapped in an inferno. He had no heartbeat; his body was mangled and burned. The firefighter who doused the flames presumed Norcott was dead.

Unbeknownst to the paramedics, they were working on a fellow EMT. A sheriff discovered Norcott’s MedStar identification card, and paramedics immediately began resuscitation attempts. “They took an extra measure in morality,” Norcott explained. “They knew I was dead, but out of a sense of doing something, anything, to save a co-worker, they made an effort.” Relating the details as they were told to him after the accident, he said, “God stepped in.”

The paramedics continued their labors as CareFlight transported Norcott to Parkland Memorial Hospital Burn Center in Dallas. The right leg was amputated two days after the accident. The left was removed four months later, after Norcott had suffered numerous agonizing and futile skin graft attempts.

It would be three months before Norcott would understand the seriousness of the accident or his losses. During that critical time, a ventilator maintained his vital functions. “Between the brain injury, the loss of memory and the medication for pain management, if I hadn’t talked with friends and family for a week, it was just like

I had seen them yesterday,” he recalled. “I was severely depressed at the time, but, looking back, I can’t help but believe that maybe I mislabeled that depression. Some of it may have been anger. I hold myself fully accountable for the accident.”

After his release from the hospital in August 1999, Norcott lived with his parents, Jacqueline and Joseph Norcott. They cared for him for two years, during which time Norcott weaned himself from the medication and

made plans for brain cognition therapy. In September 1999, Norcott’s depression deepened when he contracted a bone marrow infection in his left residual limb. “I thought I was healing and recovering only to find myself knocked down again,” he says. “At times, I prayed to God to take me out of this life because the vegetative depression was so severe.”

Prior to the accident, in addition to working for MedStar Inc., Norcott worked for JPS Health

Network as a paramedic for the Tarrant County Jail System. He had applied at fire departments seeking employment as a firefighter/paramedic. Being unable to work after the accident was unbearably frustrating to him, he says.

In December 2000 Norcott began a nine-month journey in brain cognition therapy at Easter Seals of Fort Worth. In August 2001 he “graduated” the Easter Seals Brain Injury Program, with more than expected results. “I finally was able to make accountable, well-informed, proper decisions on my own,” he said.



100 / *Norcott gathers with the groomsmen prior to his wedding, a day he once thought would never happen. Only two years before, Norcott wondered, “Who would want a man with no legs?” Lecia did.*



A TOUGH START
After several attempts to find comfortable prosthetics, David received his 'C-legs,' computerized legs that allowed him to walk step-over-step for the first time since the accident.



The next challenge Norcott chose to face was the possibility of walking again. Finding a comfortable fit with prosthetics proved to be difficult. After three years of disappointment, he received traditional prosthetics. "I literally was like an infant learning to walk again," he said.

Around this time, he began dating a longtime friend, Lecia Oliver. Norcott was coping with constant thoughts and feelings about being disabled. "Who would want a man with no legs?" he asked himself at the time. Lecia did.

Lecia, who works in a dialysis unit, said that when she met David, she saw his wheelchair as his "shoes," and yet she understand that he was insecure about pursuing a relationship from a wheelchair. "He thought he needed to be walking and working before a woman would want him," Lecia said. "He had no idea that he had a lot to offer regardless of his physical condition. I tell him that he is more man without legs than any man that has legs."

In November 2001, while recovering in the hospital from an infection in his left stump, David proposed to

TRAVELING MERCIES / Norcott currently takes the train back and forth from Dallas to Fort Worth but one day hopes to drive. He says, "I could then attend school and work part time, drive my wife on dates, drive to visit her family in Abilene, even drive to visit my children."

her. They were married Aug. 9, 2003.

That was his second post-accident dream come true. Only a month before, David received his "C-legs," computerized legs designed at Hanger Prosthetics. They allowed him to walk step-over-step for the first time since the accident. Although they came with a \$20,000 co-pay, he raised the funds through Limbs for Life, a grant from the United Way, the Texas Rehabilitation Commission and the generosity of his church, Tabernacle of Praise in Benbrook.

Not one to be sidelined by the challenges, Norcott chose to use his experience to help improve not only his own life, but also the lives of others who suffered similar

circumstances. He founded Tarrant Amputee Network Inc., a support group run by amputees for amputees. "My purpose and mission are to help reduce the stress and healing time that it takes for amputees, and to allow amputees peer visitation by me or my wife as caregivers," he explained. "There was no support group when I came out of the hospital. I wanted to change that situation."

Six years after the accident, Norcott is guarded with his language skills and often unable to handle multiple stimuli. Frustration comes from the inability to rationalize situations. But he is neither bitter nor hateful. "I realize that I've experienced what words may not be able to express in the six years since my accident," he says. "I went through great financial duress and learned some very expensive life lessons. I receive them graciously and understand the relevance with more comprehension post-mortem than I could have pre-accident. I accept the responsibility to achieve all that's possible in life, especially now with the challenges I have before me."

As for future hopes and dreams, Norcott said that the most important thing needed to provide a "step up, or a hand up, if you will" in his life, would be a minivan equipped with disability adaptations. He arises at 3 a.m. on the days of his therapy to allow sufficient time for traveling via mass transit to and from Dallas. "I would gain independence and freedom if I could drive," Norcott said. "I could then attend school and work part time, drive my wife on dates, drive to visit her family in Abilene, even drive to visit my children. What a great feeling that would be!"

Together, David and Lecia have six children:



ONGOING BLESSINGS / Lecia has existed as a pillar of support for David, who she believes "is more man without legs than any man that has legs. David is very positive ... he is my best friend."

Kristopher Oliver, 22, Aubrey Oliver, 20, Johnathen Oliver, 17, and Malesa Oliver, 14. Malesa and Johnathen reside with the Norcotts in Benbrook. David's children Kyle Patryck, 10 and Meghan Rose, 8, live with their mother in Maryland. They recently added to their family with the adoption of a three-legged Doberman pinscher named Lady.

"David is very positive and encouraging to all those around him. He is my best friend; I look forward to coming home every day because he is there," said Lecia. "We plan things together and share dreams that are alike in so many unusual ways. We trust each other without any doubt, and that makes our relationship stronger. All my children have a great relationship with him."

Norcott dreams of owning a home for the growing brood. "Owning your own home gives a sense of belonging, security and empowerment," he says. "My wife deserves that."

In addition, he plans to attend school, hopefully with grant assistance, and graduate with a degree in social work. He strives to assist others on the road to recovery. Norcott's "baby steps" message is powerful: "Move forward. Strive to meet goals. Believe in yourself. Be always on the move in mind, body and soul. Never give up. Never talk defeat. Where there is life, there is hope." ■

For more information about Tarrant Amputee Network, visit www.angelfire.com/tx6/tarrantamputeenetrk.

Although his life has taken a turn he never expected, David Norcott is a living example of what it means to embrace the challenges and pave a new way. The accident took away his legs but not his hope or his will to live. Today he carries on, building a life with wife Lecia and reaching out to other amputees, encouraging them and imparting the hope he has found.