

The View From Here
By: Justine Chichester

I never thought it would happen to me. Honestly....I never even thought about it at all.

September 20th of this year marks the four-year anniversary of the night I fell in front of my house. The night that changed my life forever. I find it very fitting that this day falls in the same month as Spinal Cord Injury awareness month.

The past four years have been an education in all things related to my injury. When I came home from the hospital after my last spinal surgery, I had no clue what many of the terms my doctors were throwing around REALLY meant for me and my everyday life. I had been labeled as “incomplete paraplegic.” What the heck did that mean? It sounded so foreign to me. Not to mention incredibly scary. So, I did the research, spoke to my physical therapists, asked tons of questions and started talking to people living with SCI for many years. It helped me understand some of what I could expect and helped me to feel that I wasn’t alone.

Most importantly, I’ve learned that every injury is different. An “incomplete” injury is when the injury survivor retains some feeling and/or movement below the site of the injury. A “complete” injury indicates no motor function or sensation below the level of the injury. The “level” of your injury depends on where it has occurred in your spine. Mine is at the thoracic level, T4-T7, which effects just below my chest bone, down to my feet. The “paraplegia” part refers to paralysis of the legs and lower body caused by spinal cord injury or disease. Just as every injury is different, the recovery can be just as varied. Mine has been slow and gradual. Some people regain sensation, movement and even the ability to walk again. Some do not.

According to The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis, every hour of every day another person is spinal cord injured. There are approximately 17,500 new traumatic spinal cord injuries each year in the USA. Currently there are approximately 353,000 people living with an SCI from trauma in the USA. The average age at the time of injury is 42 years old. I was 39 when I fell. I celebrated my 40th birthday in the hospital, at Jackson Memorial.

When people ask me about my injury, one of the positive things I share with them is that it has put things into perspective for me. So, in honor of spinal cord injury awareness month and the hundreds of thousands of people living with SCI, let me share a little of my perspective with you. I ask you, just for a moment, to imagine this happening to you. From a fall, or an infection or an accident. As a result, you've lost feeling in one or more of your limbs. You're trying to send a message from your brain to your arm, or your leg or your finger, or just your little toe to move, and it doesn't. You are sending the message but it's not being received. How would your life be affected? How would you go about living your day? If you couldn't even move. Suddenly the big problems in your life don't seem so big, do they? I heard somewhere recently, and I think it's true, that sometimes a change of perspective is all it takes to see the light.