

The O.T. Influence In My Life:

A personal experience

When at first I was asked by an OT friend of mine to write an article, introducing myself to the readers of this journal, I admit I was a bit reluctant. The reason for this was that I didn't feel anyone would be much interested in getting to know the person behind the production of this journal. On the contrary, this OT friend of mine was sure that the readers would enjoy getting to know me better, for reasons I will explain later. In the end, she had me so flattered I simply couldn't say no, so here it is! I only hope that after reading this article, you will all like me a little bit more!

Darren Douglas

Medical History

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| Name: | Darren Douglas |
| D.O.B. | 14th June 1968 |
| History: | Patient sustained a burst fracture of the C5 /C6 vertebrae following a diving accident on the 7th September 1986, resulting in complete tetraplegia i.e. total paralysis from the chest down, with only slight voluntary movements in the upper limbs. |

Before the accident . . .

Let's pop back a few years first, just to see what Darren was like before the accident. Looking back, I think I was quite an ordinary guy, who had his good sides, and those which are less good, just like everyone else.

My friendly, outgoing personality helped me to make a lot of friends, but I never had any steady girlfriends. I was never one who thought that discos were the only place to go to in the weekends. In fact, I often went to the cinema and more frequently, to the Manoel Theatre. Drama was always one of my main interests, besides other hobbies which included reading, swimming, going for long walks and music. In fact, music played a big part in my life, because apart from keeping it as a background to everything else I did, I used to work as a DJ in various discos and clubs at night. It was no steady job, because being under 18 and not having my own transport, it was difficult for me, but I loved the job so much I was even willing to do it for free, just for the fun of it. Just a few weeks before my accident, I had sat for the examinations which would have enabled

me to start a course in nursing, leading me to become an SRN. In fact, I was called for an interview just a week after my accident but by that time I was already in hospital, with the only difference being that I was a patient, not a nurse as I had planned.

The accident

I don't need to go into details as to how the accident happened - just a brief description of what actually took place will suffice. Apart from the fact that it's not something very pleasant to remember, I wanted my article to concentrate more on the part which O.T. played as part of my rehabilitation programme.

It happened during a barbeque to which I went together with my family and some friends. We had all been prepared for a dive in the swimming pool; so much so that we were all wearing our bathing suits underneath. As things turned out, we were not allowed to use the pool until we finished our food, but even then, we had to wait longer than that since we had to sit through a long, boring speech afterwards, followed by some spot prizes (I won a bottle of champagne!) and a dance session by the *D.A. Team Dancers*. You can imagine how relieved we all were when we were finally allowed to use the pool, so we all started to strip down to our bathing suits. As it happened, I was the one who stripped first so I took a short sprint until I reached the deepest end of the pool, where I sprang off the edge and

The first two years. . .

I spent the first five days following my accident in the I.T.U. I don't remember much of those days as I was half sedated most of the time but I do remember a lot of people coming to see me, (most of whom were always crying, to my amazement!). I also remember feeling very hungry, as usual, despite the precarious

situation I was in. I was placed on a Striker-frame with goodness knows how many kilos of weight pulling at my head and they used to turn me face down every four hours or so. After five days I was transferred to the M.O.D. where I was to stay for seven months.

I spent nine weeks on the Striker-frame but to me it seemed an eternity. When at last they transferred me to a normal bed I began doing physiotherapy sessions and three months after my accident I went home for the first time. It was Christmas Eve and I stayed for three days. After that, I continued to go home for the weekend on a regular basis. In spite of all this, I was still quite depressed and the fact that I used to spend the time just staring at the ceiling and maybe watch some TV didn't help a lot. After seven months we were transferred to the newly-opened *Spinal Unit* at Boffa Hospital. There it was very different from St.Luke's in that it almost didn't feel like being in a hospital at all. The atmosphere was very friendly and so was the staff. This helped me a lot but there was still something missing which at that time I didn't know what it was.

O.T. comes to the rescue!

As it turned out, that "something missing" came about a year later, in the form of Miss Joanna Zammit Briffa. She was the first O.T. to work at Boffa and the Spinal Unit and she immediately set to work on me.

The first step was to order a plastic hand-grip, in which I could stick a pencil, paintbrush, fork etc. Thus I began to learn how to write using this hand-grip. At first I began by drawing circles and joining dots; then slowly I passed on to writing a few words. My hand coordination continued to improve until I was ready to start using a manual typewriter. The O.T. also taught me how to hold a book to read and soon I was also able to turn the pages over without any help. By now Ms. Zammit Briffa's time was up and with each O.T. that came along, then on a three monthly rotation and later on for longer

periods, new activities were introduced and adaptations tailored accordingly. One of these activities was eating independently, which was most welcome, seeing that eating was very high in my list of hobbies.

Another activity which I experimented with was painting. In fact, I did painting by numbers, painting on T-shirts which I did both for myself and for several of my friends, and I was also asked to design one of the yearly Christmas cards issued by the Friends of the Order for Christmas '92.

As time went by, I changed my manual typewriter to an electronic one and later to a computer for which I actually took a course. Soon I began writing short comedies which I then used to act out together with whoever the O.T. was at Boffa. I also got interested in

writing horror stories and poems. Lately I have also been assigned the typing and design of the MJOT and the Physiotherapy Newsletter besides other projects such as Dissertations for students and posters for the promotion of various activities.

In conclusion

Thanks to occupational therapy now I can say that I am a different person altogether. I lead a normal, active life and on looking back, I really cannot believe how I survived those first few years doing absolutely nothing at all. I am very satisfied with the level of life that I am leading and I feel ready to take up any new challenges that may come my way.



DARREN WITH SINGER GIORGINA DURING AN ENTERTAINMENT EVENING DARREN HIMSELF ORGANISED.