

New Westminster News Leader

Paralysis didn't paralyze New Westminster volunteer Vivian Garcia



Vivian Garcia shares a treat with her assistance dog. She's just won a Courage To Comeback award.

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Vivian Garcia remembers lying paralyzed in a hospital bed after a traumatic accident and her doctor saying that if she survived the next three days, she would have a good chance of living another 10 years.

“I’m not very good at following instructions,” said Garcia on Tuesday, almost 21 years after that conversation.

Today the New Westminster resident, paralyzed

from the chest down, is the recipient of a Courage to Come Back award, sponsored by Coast Mental Health.

Given what she has overcome, it's hard to argue with the selection.

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Garcia's story starts in the summer of 1988 when she was walking through the woods behind her home on Bowen Island with her eight-month-old son.

Her husband was cutting down a tree that was threatening to fall on hydro lines and she was offering him a cup of coffee. As she walked back to the house, a tree standing next to the one just cut down fell on her back, severing her spinal cord.

Her husband immediately came to her aid and found their son had been thrown far from the tree but Garcia lay underneath the tree. Unable to remove the tree or get her out, he ran for help.

She lay on the ground with tree sap and spiders in her hair, unsure if she would live. At one point she looked into the sky and saw three eagles soaring. Those majestic eagles were a life saver, she said.

"There's something about eagles. Probably it sounds crazy but that's what it was," said Garcia of the raptors which gave her a spiritual uplift.

The thought of her son also gave her a reason to carry on.

But the ordeal was far from over.

After the Bowen Island volunteer fire department cut up the fallen tree and placed her on a body board, she was taken off the island in a Canadian Coast Guard hovercraft.

As they sped to Vancouver, her emergency rescuers said there were no beds available in Lower Mainland hospitals capable of treating spinal cord injuries. She would have to be

shipped to Edmonton for medical treatment.

“I was bleeding internally so I wouldn’t have survived,” she said.

The experienced paramedic caring for Garcia knew this as well. So he wheeled her gurney into Shaughnessy Hospital and left her next to the nurse’s desk. He then walked away after telling her, ‘You’ll be fine now.’”

Sure enough, a doctor noticed her and began to provide treatment moments after the paramedic left. A bed was found for Garcia after all.

But it wasn’t just the loss of the use of her legs that changed her life. Garcia and her partner were financially devastated, eventually losing their cars and home as the health care costs mounted.

Then the couple had a second child, followed by her husband leaving her. The wheelchair-bound Garcia was faced with raising two children on her own.

Making matters even more difficult were the mobility obstacles she faced. Many sidewalks, facilities, restaurants and other businesses were inaccessible. She remembers being told by a restaurant owner, “We don’t serve your kind here.”

Rather than give up, she decided to change things. Something she’s been doing for almost 20 years.

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Garcia has been an active voice for change, serving as a volunteer with the New Westminster special services and access committee, TransLink’s accessible transit committee and access transit user advisory committee, the BC Rehab Foundation and the BC Paraplegic Association peer program.

She’s seen the results of the advocacy work she and others have accomplished.

“A lot of things have changed over the last 20

years,” said Garcia.

In addition to encouraging accessibility in New Westminster and the region, Garcia has also been an unofficial and unpaid youth counsellor for decades.

Her home has been a neighbourhood clubhouse for kids. It’s been a place to sleep, get help with homework, get a meal, advice, and a chance to vent and play.

“I always had six to eight kids in my house all the time, of all ages,” said Garcia. “Some wouldn’t have made it through school or their other issues without me.”

Today, many of those teens who streamed through her home call her mom.

For all of them she’s consistently passed on the same guidance—the same advice she followed when adversity was overwhelming her life.

“You have the option of living in the past or moving forward,” she said. “I live my life for today.”

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