

Setting a goal 'gave me a focus'

'I wanted to be able to help people'

BY LORA GRINDLAY, THE PROVINCE APRIL 27, 2009



Lori Slater credits her positive attitude and supportive family for helping her adjust to life in a wheelchair.

Photograph by: Nick Procaylo, The Province

For the 11th year Coast Mental Health will present six people with Courage to Come Back Awards for overcoming injury, illness and adversity and for inspiring those around them while doing so. Recipients will be celebrated at a gala dinner at Vancouver's Hyatt Regency Hotel on April 30. Today, in our final instalment, we profile the recipient in the medical category. Find more at coastmentalhealth.com

Told in 2005 that she would live the rest of her life from a wheelchair, Lori Slater set a goal.

"It was as if something just clicked that life had to go on," said the 52-year-old Fort St. John woman.

"I set a goal -- the first goal I ever remember setting, and it was that I wanted to be able to support people with spinal-cord injuries in a way that the professionals can't do.

"I thought, 'Life is too short.' I think setting that goal gave me a focus like I've never had before."

Slater was born with spina bifida, had her first surgery at 10 days old to repair an opening in her spinal

cord and, although she had a normal and active childhood, the congenital birth defect eventually caused paralysis in her legs and the wheelchair became her only option.

"I didn't have a choice. I was very reluctant. People say I was stubborn but I want to say it was more independent. I guess I wasn't ready to face that at that point," Slater said.

She had five spinal surgeries, most of which were to remove scar tissue and fatty cells. Losing strength in her legs and losing feeling in her feet was always the first sign that things were taking a turn for the worse.

Eventually after her final surgery in 2003, she was left inoperable.

Her legs are numb to the touch but she suffers greatly every day from neuropathic pain because of raw nerve endings.

But the sleepless nights due to pain have never stopped her from volunteering to help others with spinal-cord injuries -- to the tune of 1,650 hours a year.

When she was on the South Coast for surgery and rehabilitation, she was surrounded by an intense support system of counsellors and therapists. Going home to northern B.C. was frightening and lonely. "It was that peer support that was really missing," said Slater.

For the Rick Hansen Foundation, she is an ambassador, regional assistant, runs the Fort St. John Wheels in Motion event and allocates fundraising money. She tours the North speaking to audiences about living with a disability, trains peer support workers and solicits donations.

She is also chairs the mayor's disability advisory council in Fort St. John, works with the B.C. Paraplegic Association and tries to make her hometown more accessible.

"It's not just helping those of us with disabilities," she said. "We need to make our streets accessible for all people -- moms pushing baby carriages and seniors with walkers. We need to be more aware."

Slater is now in what she calls her "new normal," which means she's had to relearn everything, including how to ask for help.

"Nothing is done the same -- reaching for things, dressing, the cooking, the cleaning. It's all those things that we all take for granted. Heaven knows I did."

She credits her prevailing positive attitude to the undying support from her two daughters and her husband Bob, whom she calls "the love of my life and my best friend."

And after four years in a chair, she's been able to put one of her biggest fears to rest. It was the fear that her grandchildren would be afraid of her wheelchair.

"It never goes that I don't have at least two of them on my lap and one behind pushing," she says.
"Those five grandchildren are the light of my life."

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