

Published May 17th, 2017

Inspiring outcome to an MOFD emergency call

By Nick Marnell



Robertson and firefighter Airola reunite in April.
Photo provided

Reed Robertson left his friend's house in north Orinda the evening of Sept. 18, and as he biked home along La Espiral his bicycle hit a crack in the pavement, he rolled over the handlebars and he slammed into the street, banging his helmet, forehead and shoulder into the pavement. "I could feel something happening to my neck, and I knew it wasn't good," Robertson said.

He lay in the street, saw lights approaching and he tried to get out of the way of the traffic but he could not move. "My God, I hope I don't get run over right now," thought Robertson, who heard a neighbor frantically call 911.

Robertson could not move because the C4 and C5 vertebrae at the base of his neck had jammed together, and he lay paralyzed.

The Response

Capt. Adam Goodyear of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and his Station 43 engine company arrived at the scene at 8:55 p.m. "Right off the bat, we had a feeling this was significant," Goodyear said. "He was still, in the middle of the road, in an awkward position. He was tangled in his bike."

Less than 10 seconds later arrived the Station 44 ambulance. "When we see someone sprawled out, in no pain, lying perfectly still and calm, it gets our attention," said firefighter-paramedic Jacob Airola, who immediately assessed a spinal cord injury.

"They kept poking me, but I felt nothing," Robertson said. "Where's your arm, they'd ask me, and I'd say it was by my side. But I couldn't locate it."

Keeping the body straight and immobile is critical with a spinal cord injury, and the firefighters stabilized Robertson's neck and placed him on a vacuum splint, a device that runs the entire length of the body and wraps around the patient. Onto a gurney they placed Robertson, and into the ambulance to John Muir Hospital.

"It was a somber ride," Airola said. Since Robertson never lost consciousness and was able to speak, Airola asked him about his day, his job, his love of biking. It was a subtle bit of investigative work, with Airola trying to ascertain if anything was going on in Robertson's life that might compromise his treatment.

The Rehab

On the way to the hospital, Robertson felt his right toe. He could not move it, but he felt it, and at that point he realized two things: that he was determined to relearn how to walk and that he would need a lot of therapy.

Robertson had surgery two days later. As he recovered, he lay strapped onto the hospital bed, screws and rods inserted into his neck, a ventilator down his throat. "It was like witnessing your own death," he said. "People are talking and crying, and you're just lying there and you can't move."

After five days in the intensive care unit, Robertson began his rehab. For four hours a day, Robertson pushed, kicked and pressed to the point of exhaustion, the toll on his body so severe so that he would pass out as his family and friends talked to him. In order to eat, he had to lean his head into his food, his arms of little use.

In October Robertson flew to Denver to Craig Hospital, one of the country's premier centers for spinal cord rehabilitation. Improvement came quickly. Robertson measured his progress as he wheeled into the elevator. At first, he pushed the floor buttons with his forehead, gradually working up to the use of his arms. On Nov. 2, he abandoned his wheelchair completely.

"I was lucky," said Robertson, who experienced flashes of survivor's guilt as he regained use of his limbs while other patients made little or no progress. "I used my strong recovery to inspire the other people around me so that they could do better." He became the model of a patient who worked hard and came all the way back.

The Recovery

Robertson, 35, returned to Orinda in mid-December. He used a ride-booking service to continue his rehab and to work at his real estate business. On March 31, he regained his driver's license and he visited Station 44 to thank the firefighters. "I was surprised he walked into the station," Airola said. "I didn't think it was possible, but if anyone could do it, it would be Reed."

Only a medical professional might notice anything awry with Robertson today. He walks, he jogs, he rides his bicycle, he traveled to Macchu Pichu in April. He has trouble lifting his right arm above his shoulder, and he struggles to flex the fingers of his left hand, but otherwise he appears in excellent health.

"You can come back," Robertson said. "It's tricky, and it involves a lot of rehab and some luck. But, it can be done."

Robertson will speak at the May 17 MOFD board of directors meeting, 6:30 p.m. in the Mosaic Room at the Hacienda de las Flores in Moraga.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA