

THE VANCOUVER SUN

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“There was this little person in this burned body trying to say something like ‘Mom, help me.’ That was just too hard.”

DONNA WEBER, On seeing her injured son for the first time after his horrifying industrial accident



GREG PENDER/SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

Curtis Weber found love in the arms of Lori Buschman, a nurse who appreciates his sense of humour. They plan to marry in June and want to start building a family right away.

Burned up — but not out

Curtis Weber took 14,400 volts and survived. It's a story of love and loyalty

Curtis Weber remembers little of the day in July 1999 that changed his life. Tilt your head into the Prairie wind today and you might hear the faint sound of clapping as he stands on the cusp of a new life, one that nearly wasn't. Doctors look back on his case and consider it remarkable.

Back then, it was his third day on the job with a crew building steel grain bins.

He had been holding two support beams of a metal structure called a hopper, steadying it, when a crane with cables attached to the hopper hit a power line. In a flash, 14,400 volts of electricity jolted through his 17-year-old body. That's enough power to light up a town.

Witnesses looked on in horror as his body became a ball of fire ricocheting like a ping-pong ball in several directions. They could see his arms and legs thrashing at the edges.

When ambulance attendants arrived, they first went to two other workers who were also injured. At least there was hope for them. They figured there was no way the teenage boy could be alive. When they got to him, his body was still smouldering. After they turned him over, he let out a gasp, emitting black foam.

But when power, with its wanton whims, decided to strike this young man, it had no idea who it was tangling with.

"Get me out of the sun," he pleaded. He felt the sun searing into his burned skin. He was coherent enough to give phone numbers for his family. "Will I be paralyzed?" he asked in the

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VANCOUVER SUN



ambulance as it sped to University Hospital in Saskatoon. No, he wouldn't be.

Promise?

Promise.

Then, the veil closed. Curtis slipped into the murky world of unconsciousness where he would remain while in an intensive care ward for about six weeks.

His vital signs plunged. His kidneys failed. He was placed on life support. He was going nowhere but down. "If he was older, we probably wouldn't have resuscitated him," recalled Saskatoon plastic surgeon Dr. Brian Clapson.

When his parents, Donna and Ken Weber, arrived at the hospital several hours later, doctors took them into a little room and told them there wasn't much hope. They were gently told they might have to make a decision to pull the plug, they recalled. The priest was called.

Donna's friend, Rosalie Payne, pressed a rosary into her hand at the hospital.

"We're not Catholic. I didn't know how to use it."

Payne told her it didn't matter, that just having it with her would help. "That thing was in

my hands. It was in my pocket at all times."

Late that night, after seeing her beautiful boy lying broken in a bed, Donna went to the hospital chapel. "I prayed for a miracle." She asked for Curtis's survival. Then "I guess I got a little greedy and asked for everything to come back normal." From then on, she placed her son's fate in God's hands. She felt so helpless.

Ken is a successful businessman, the owner of a number of video stores, and a strapping outdoorsman who revels in facing the elements with his three sons. Little fazes him, yet he emerged from Curtis's room badly shaken. "I thought there is no way this kid is going to survive." He wasn't one for prayer. "I think I was praying then."

Curtis's body was unrecognizable to just about everyone who came to see him. Had his name not been on the bedside, those close to him would have walked right by. The ruggedly handsome, promising hockey player lay swathed in bandages with tubes snaking out in every direction. The few exposed parts were smeared with cream.

But come they did, a steady pilgrimage of family, friends of family and his young hockey playing mates who couldn't stay away. They chipped in for gas, roared down the highway between Battleford and Saskatoon, getting speeding tickets on the hour-plus journey.

Some paused at the door of the ICU and retreated. They couldn't go further. Others went in, only to leave in tears.

Things went from bad to worse. As doctors pumped fluid through him to clean out his tis-

sues, his rakish body swelled to the size of a football player's. His eye sockets were one big mass. His body was weeping and oozing into the sheets.

Curtis's friend, Jesse Heintz, who is now an Edmonton firefighter, had to sit down after seeing Curtis for the first time. "My legs felt weak. It was really hot in that room."

But they all talked to the inert body lying on the bed as though he could hear every word. We are here for you, Curtis. We won't leave you, Curtis. We love you, Curtis.

The second day, when Donna and Ken went in to see their son, he began thrashing about. He was trying to tell them something. All the machines went off. His heart rate soared. "There was this little person in this burned body trying to say something like 'Mom, help me,'" recalled Donna. "That was just too hard." Nurses rushed in to sedate him. They were worried he would suffer a heart attack.

Word of the young man's fate swirled in the community. He wasn't expected to make it. With all those injuries, he would be better off dead anyway, some said. Whatever the truth, Curtis's friends arrived in such numbers nurses had to send them in in small groups. Once inside, they played CDs for him and sang along. They watched sports and talked to him as though he were watching too. They regaled him with tales of their weekend escapades. Sometimes they just talked about the weather.

Then, when they left, they peered from the

See **TRUTH REVEALED** C2

“Fortunately, his heart and lungs were so useful. He was always able to be resuscitated. He was always able to get through each procedure.”

DR. BRIAN CLAPSON, Saskatoon plastic surgeon on Curtis Weber's incredible will to live

Truth revealed as bandages came off

From C1

outside of the hospital in this little window next to his bed.

Goodbye, Curtis.

Their parents watched them grow from boys into men overnight.

Meanwhile, Donna's two sisters, Anne Cole and Susan Anderson, had arrived shortly after hearing of the accident. They remained there around the clock with Donna and Ken, sleeping in chairs in the waiting room for weeks. They filled in for each other in the long months ahead.

At night, before going to sleep, they ran their hands through Curtis's thick, dark hair.

Goodnight, Curtis.

Family and friends

There were times when Donna couldn't face seeing the burned hulk that had once been her sweet baby. So either Anne or Susan went in instead. At the end of a long corridor, Donna waited. What was the news? Good? Bad? She learned to read their faces from afar.

Susan was the humorous one. She could shine light in the darkest of corners. Anne was the practical one. She could be tough when toughness was called for. Without them, Donna said she couldn't have done it.

There were friends, too, like Payne, Jesse's mother Gail Heintz, and Leonard Kozlowski, who all came to the hospital as Curtis rallied and faltered. Donna felt she was never alone. "You just couldn't stay away," said Gail Heintz. They were drawn by a powerful force.

They watched and they waited; they waited and they watched. As Curtis was wheeled in for operation after operation, they grew to recognize the sound of the pump on his air-mattress bed coming down the hall. Anne said it reminds her of the sound of an industrial mall cleaner. She hates it to this day.

Once doctors decided they would try to save him, they went flat out. Clapson said Curtis was put through a rigorous round of operations to trim away dead tissue. "Fortunately, his heart and lungs were so useful. He was always able to be resuscitated. He was always able to get through each procedure."

His vital signs stabilized but that didn't mean he was home free. His temperature was watched as closely as a weather vane in an approaching storm. Even a slight rise could spell infection, which could be deadly. It rose a few times.

"At the beginning, it's absolute shock. As the days go on, it becomes a fear of everything," said Donna.

As the bandages came off, the truth was revealed. Curtis's body looked like an emaciated slab of red meat mottled with black. His skin flaked like a croissant. Rot set in. The smell was terrible. The news was worse.

At first, they thought Curtis would lose a few fingers and toes. They could live with that, couldn't they?

That minimalist view expanded remarkably and swiftly. They learned he would lose half a foot and a hand. With the news, particularly of the loss of his hand, a numbness settled over the family. Curtis had been such an athlete, such a hockey player. How would he ever accept this when he emerged from the fog? Curtis's older brother, Brad, grew angry and wept. Why did this have to happen to his brother?

Ken and Donna watched as doctors chipped away at their son. When would it end?

There was more to come. The lost hand grew to be a lost right arm and the half a foot grew to be his left leg below the knee. It could have been much worse. Doctors struggled to save his left knee which turned black and swelled to an enormous size. A tissue graft had failed. It was a bloody mess. In the end, they saved it by cutting Curtis's leg below the knee and flapping the skin up over it.

Then there was his face. His lips were swollen, the right side of his nose was black and a bone jutted from his chin. His right eye drooped and wandered at times in the darkness of the hospital room. Where was the boy brimming with youth who had bounded across the graduation stage just a few short weeks ago?

As his face developed scars, the right side of his mouth was drawn up into a permanent snarl and the right side of his nose was falling off.

Brain damage or blindness

What was happening beneath the sheets was even more troubling. All that was left in the groin area was the scrotum, one testicle and just a stump measuring a few centimetres where his penis had been. A catheter dangled down his leg. Doctors held out little hope that Curtis would ever be a lover. He risked being catheterized for the rest of his life.

The jolt of power had rampaged through the front of Curtis's body.

"His face, groin, chest, penis, legs — these are very disturbing areas to have such deep burns," said Clapson. "If they are on the backside, they don't bother you as much."

When the rotting and cutting stopped, Curtis was left minus most of the right side of his face, his right arm, his left leg and most of his genitals. On his remaining left hand, the pinkie was non-functioning and cauterized and he had limited use of his thumb, which had to be rebuilt.

But one of the biggest worries was the unknown. Had he suffered brain damage or loss of vision? There was no way of knowing as he lay unconscious. When he finally opened his eyes, Brad moved his hands in front of them to see if they would follow, and flickered his fingers to see if Curtis would blink. It took a long time to discover that he been spared from brain damage and blindness.

The rebuilding of Curtis required more than 30 operations, the bulk of them in Saskatoon with the final ones in Toronto. Flesh from his ear was used to rebuild his nose. Skin from his back was used to rebuild his right cheek. So it



Curtis Weber is out of intensive care in this family photo taken at University Hospital in Saskatoon in 1999. He was conscious, but hooked up to a feeding tube. His right arm had been amputated and his left hand had been operated on.

went. Curtis was rearranged. The 40 per cent of his body that wasn't burned was used to rebuild the 60 per cent that was. There was skin graft after skin graft after skin graft. Virtually no part of him was left untouched.

Feeding Curtis became a monumental task requiring determination on the part of his family. Burn victims require many more calories than a normal person. Curtis's mouth was so mangled, there was no way he could eat the normal way. So his parents and his aunts used a big syringe to inject liquid calories into him. Then they used tongue depressors to pry his mouth open so they could feed him the most calorie-laden foods they could find. That often meant sweets. They left a lingering distaste in his mouth. Now, Curtis can't eat sweets.

In the eyes of others

Gradually, he began to emerge from the hazy gauze of unconsciousness. That's when it began to dawn on him how hurt he was. He read his clues in the eyes of others. They became his mirror.

His first clue came when his little brother, Blaine, came to visit. Blaine was only 13 at the time. Curtis could see the shock written all over his face. "He had a look on his face like he wasn't sure that was me but he was told that was me to it had to be me," recalled Curtis. "I knew I was burned and I knew it was bad and I knew things were different but I really didn't

comprehend it until then."

Blaine had been left in the care of friends back home and largely in the dark about his brother's condition. Donna tried to prepare him for what he would see but really, there was no way of preparing anyone.

Blaine recalled thinking, "It wasn't Curtis. It wasn't my brother. It was someone burned." He expected his brother to talk. Curtis lay mute.

When the visit was over, Blaine went to the bathroom, locked himself in and wept.

Curtis's second clue came when his dad was reading a card to him. Suddenly, his dad's voice went silent. Curtis had always thought of his dad as this big, strong guy. Big guys don't cry. Yet here was his dad, his big, powerful, unflappable dad, crying. Curtis had never seen that before. Then he knew. "That was the most sad I felt."

After regaining consciousness, it took a while for Curtis to learn to speak. So those around him developed a rudimentary way of communicating with him. Blink once for yes; blink twice for no. They spelled out the ABCs, getting Curtis to nod when they had settled on the right letter. It was slow and painstaking, but they were able to build words.

That way, Curtis was able to start asking questions about himself. He was understandably curious. Sensing something was missing in the groin area, he asked his Auntie Anne to explain. Cole didn't feel it was her place to answer so Ken had to go in and tell his son the

bleak truth.

When Curtis could speak, a few words tumbled out. They were along the lines of "mom," "I can talk" and "Kozi, you asshole." Hardly profound but music to everyone's ears. In the case of the latter, he was referring to Adam Kozlowski, a burly guy who remained one of Curtis's most faithful friends from start to finish. At least Curtis had retained his sense of humour.

As Curtis recovered and gained mobility, his friends were pressed into more practical service like helping him in and out of the wheelchair.

Then there came the time when he needed to go to the bathroom and neither a nurse nor his mother could be found. So Chris Graw, a hockey friend since childhood, lifted him on to the bedpan, then wiped his bottom as carefully and tenderly as though he were a baby. It was an act of love and of mercy. Graw is glad he did it.

His friends did everything from scratching his itchy skin to videotaping their weekend pranks so they could keep him in the loop. Indeed, one of the hardest parts for Curtis was seeing his friends move on to serious hockey and partying on the weekends while he could do neither. They did what they could to help.

One day, Graw snuck him down an elevator at the University Hospital to a nurse's lounge with a pool table. They had a secret game. Curtis won. Said Graw, "He was a natural at everything he did."

Gordie Howe stops by

Perhaps nobody knew. How could they have known? But his friends knew that Curtis was special. He was this rare combination of a carousing but caring kid. He was the leader of their pack. They were lost without him.

And "his friends never let him down," said Donna. "They never pitied him. They talked to him like they always did. They just waited him out."

Curtis was bolstered in the hospital by a high-profile visitor. Former hockey great Gordie Howe and his wife, Colleen, planned to stay only a few minutes but wound up staying around an hour. They and the young patient had so much to say to each other.

Curtis's attitude remained so positive. "In a nutshell, I was thinking, 'Let's do whatever has to be done and let's get out of here.' I had total trust in everyone around me — family, friends and doctors. I just went with whatever I was told."

After about five months in University Hospital, the day arrived when Curtis was released and sent across the city for rehab.

It was like coming out of a cocoon. He remembers crossing the Saskatchewan River which slices through Saskatoon, a city that preens on the Prairie. As he crossed, the river winked and shone like a promise. It reminded Curtis of all the times he had hunting and fishing with his father. He was itching to get back on his feet. He had faith that good times lay ahead.

The funny boy who had lain dormant inside him started waking and rattling inside his rib cage. Most people would have been shy about being fitted with a hook where his right hand had been. Not Curtis. He shook it at passersby and remarked, "Now, I'm unique." The hook was later replaced with a prosthesis.

The first visits home to Battleford were filled with joy but scary, too, because of all the care he still required. At first, Curtis couldn't walk and didn't have a wheelchair so he had to drag himself or be carried.

He slept downstairs in the family's graceful two-storey home in one of the more affluent suburbs. His family equipped him with pot lids to bang on in the middle of the night.

And again, there were his friends. There was the time when Curtis wanted to go to a hockey game but his wheelchair wouldn't fit in the back of the car they were driving. No problem.



He was a hockey-playing 17-year-old when he graduated high school in June 1999, just about a month before 14,400 volts of electricity jolted through his young body in a workplace accident in Battleford, Sask.

“He is an amazing guy, every time he came to see me, we would plan the next stage of his reconstruction and he would just go for it.”

DR. PETER NELIGAN, Wharton chair in reconstructive plastic surgery at the University of Toronto and at Toronto General Hospital



GREG PENDER/SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

The 40 per cent of Weber's body that wasn't burned was used to rebuild the 60 per cent that was and he didn't give up in the struggle to live with a prosthetic hand and leg. And it wasn't just local players who boosted the hockey fan. He had a long visit from the legendary Gordie Howe and special game invitations from the Edmonton Oilers and Calgary Flames.

Kozlowski put him on his back and, with the help of another friend, carried him piggyback into the rink.

At this point, Curtis's face was not a pretty sight. The right side was still terribly disfigured. It never bothered him. "Everyone I knew didn't treat me any different. Things didn't change for me afterward. So it didn't bother me if other people stared."

It wasn't just local hockey players who swept Curtis up in their embrace. In the great Canadian way, the big players charged in, too. The Edmonton Oilers sent him a card signed by all the players and invited him for a ceremony at centre ice where they presented him with a signed jersey.

The Calgary Flames invited him to a game, too. Curtis was such a loyal Oilers fan, he was tempted to decline the invitation but his dad talked him into it. At the game, he met former Flames player Lanny McDonald and was taken to the dressing room where he was introduced to each of the players and presented with a jersey.

They were all small, incremental steps on his road to recovery.

At home, Curtis's parents and his brothers cared for him but never coddled him.

Brad insisted that Curtis tie his own shoes and try to feed himself with a knife and fork. Both were difficult at the start. "We watched him going from being a really good hockey player to having a tough time tying his shoes," said Brad.

During a family visit to Brad's house, they all got talking about golf and how good Curtis used to be at it. Donna told Brad to get a golf club and a ball. "Just swing it," Donna told Curtis. After some hesitation, he did, hitting the ball clear across a highway. It was a perfect

shot.

Not everything went that smoothly. Ken couldn't wait to get Curtis out hunting. The two ventured out before Curtis had his prosthetic right leg. They propped his partial leg up on an orange crate and off they went.

When hunting, Curtis had always opened gates in the countryside for his father, who drove. But this time, he couldn't. He cried over it at the supper table. It was a tough time for both father and son.

Recalled Ken: "I told him, 'I didn't expect you to. You had only one goddamn leg.' I said, 'If you would have been able to get out, I would have kicked your ass out of the truck and go open the gate, you lazy bugger. But I didn't expect you to. You couldn't.' He felt he was useless and that he didn't live up to his end of the hunting."

It was the first and only time that Ken saw Curtis feeling sorry for himself. Meanwhile, Brad and Blaine developed a deep appreciation of their brother. They watched as he struggled to deal with fishing lines with a prosthetic right hand and a maimed left one. They watched him innovate and develop unorthodox ways of carrying loads and shifting weights. He grew in their eyes.

They all learned to laugh at the missteps and the mishaps. Curtis had always been one for plunging into unknown territory and that didn't change. He got himself into scrapes, losing his prosthetic arm and leg at inopportune moments, much to the astonishment of unknowing spectators.

Once the battery on his prosthetic hand died as he was opening a cooler door to get a drink in a store. There was somebody behind him. Ever resourceful, he pretended he hadn't decided what he wanted yet and he needed another

look in the fridge. That gave him time to figure out how to get the hand off.

Doctor and patient click

So much of the life-saving deconstruction of Curtis took place in Saskatoon, but the time came to rebuild him.

Donna wanted nothing but the best for her young son who had a lifetime of promise ahead of him. For this, with Saskatoon doctors suggesting referrals, she and Ken considered doctors in Boston, Chicago and Toronto. In the end, they settled on Dr. Peter Neligan, who is Wharton chair in reconstructive plastic surgery at the University of Toronto and at Toronto General Hospital.

The Webers describe him as a jolly man from Ireland who never talked in doctor gibberish. In finding him, "we were blessed," said Donna.

The first time Neligan examined Curtis, he said, "Don't mind me. I'm just looking for spare parts."

The doctor and patient clicked.

Neligan remarks to this day about how he and Curtis developed a special relationship and what an extraordinary young man he was. He recalled, too, how Curtis's injuries were so severe, they tested his skills as a plastic surgeon and required him to improvise.

"This guy went through a devastating burn injury and he took it in his stride. Most other people would have been totally devastated. He is an amazing guy because every time he came to see me, we would plan the next stage of his reconstruction and he would just go for it."

Neligan estimates he performed at least a dozen operations on Curtis, some of them lasting 10 to 12 hours.

Out of this came some surprising good news.

Although Curtis had lost 80 per cent of his penis, the short stump remaining had normal sensation and some erectile capabilities. Using tissue from Curtis's thigh, Neligan was able to rebuild it so that Curtis could have an erection and children.

It was a complex procedure. "He didn't have an awful lot of spare tissue. The only option we could use to make a penis was the one area of his thigh that wasn't burned. We didn't have a lot of other options. We had to do things that were a bit different from the normal techniques we use."

There was a major setback in this area. When Curtis got back home after the surgery, his urethra, the tube through which urine passes, became blocked. For days, he felt the urge to urinate but couldn't. Local doctors in Battleford refused to tamper with the delicately reconstructed area.

So Curtis, in great discomfort, flew to Toronto on a commercial flight and a catheter had to be inserted through his stomach to drain the urine.

"Then we had to take the penis apart, put a new tube inside and put it back together," said the plain-talking Neligan.

Neligan knew early that Curtis was pretty amazing but one incident at the hospital told him his patient was truly remarkable. There was another patient in the burn unit who had similar injuries to Curtis but who wasn't doing well. Curtis agreed to talk to him "which was pretty amazing for a guy of Curtis's age."

As Curtis recalls it, the boy was deeply depressed and refusing to leave his hospital room. "He was really quiet and you could tell he was really, really angry. I knew he didn't

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Six years of recovery

Here is a time line of the surgeries on Curtis Weber provided by Dr. Brian Clapson in Saskatoon and Dr. Peter Neligan in Toronto, the two plastic surgeons who treated him.

Surgeries in Saskatoon:

1999

July 29: Escharotomy and fasciotomy to arm and leg.

July 31: Debridement of burns.

Aug. 2: Debridement and grafting multiple areas.

Aug. 4: Debridement and grafting multiple areas.

Aug. 6: Debridement and grafting multiple areas.

Aug. 8: Debridement and grafting, amputation of left forefoot.

Aug. 13: Debridement and

grafting.

Aug. 18: Debridement and grafting.

Aug. 23: Debridement and grafting.

Aug. 27: Amputation right hand.

Sept. 1: Debridement and grafting.

Sept. 8: Debridement and grafting.

Sept. 17: Debridement and grafting.

Oct. 18: Free flap to the left knee.

Nov. 5: Right forearm amputation and left leg below knee amputation; release of lower lip scars.

Surgeries in Toronto beginning with the date, the procedure and the reconstruction:

2000



March, 2000: Release of perioral contractures; scapular free flap.

July, 2000: Reconstruction of right nasal ala; helical root free flap.

October, 2000: Reconstruction of left thumb and release of

right groin contracture; pedicled posterior thigh flap.

2001

February, 2001: Repair of Boutonniere deformity left little finger and release penile contracture; full thickness skin

graft and local flap closure.

May, 2001: Urinary retention; meatoplasty.

July, 2001: Recontouring upper and lower lips; flap debulking and cartilage graft to philtrum.

In the summer of 2000, Weber posed with Dr. Peter Neligan at Toronto General Hospital after surgery to replace his right nostril. Dr. Neligan allows Weber to try on his surgery light and magnifying lens.

October, 2001: Scar revision right cheek, revision nasal tip, liposuction to scapular flap

2002

May, 2002: Penile reconstruction; anterolateral thigh free flap.

June, 2002: Revision penile reconstruction; coronoplasty and tattooing.

July, 2002: Repair urethral fistula; full thickness skin graft.

November, 2002: Reconstruction urethra; dorsalis pedis free flap.

June, 2004: Revision lip, release of penile contracture; local flap repair.

Still to come: surgery to the right-arm stump.

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“I felt more sorry for the people that felt sorry for me than I felt sorry for myself.”

CURTIS WEBER, *On his emotions as he lay in hospital recuperating from his injuries*



GREG PENDER/SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

Flanked by his dad Ken and mom Donna, and brothers Brad and Blaine, Weber poses at his family home in Battleford, Sask. ‘We watched him going from being a really good hockey player to having a tough time tying his shoes,’ Brad recalls of his brother’s recovery.

Sex was a challenge for the couple

From C3

want me to be there.”

Curtis just talked to him, one young man to another. He whipped his shirt off and lifted his pant leg, showing him scars and explaining how he had gone from barely being able to move his good leg to doing so many of the outdoorsy things he loved. “I just basically showed him everything I had for scars and burns and prosthetics.”

The two agreed they weren’t likely candidates for a beauty pageant. Curtis gave the boy, who was also a hockey fan, an Oilers jersey.

That night, the boy came out of his room for the first time to watch sports on television. He was wearing the jersey.

With most of the rebuilding of Curtis complete, life is good for him these days. Now 23, he has graduated from a two-year diploma course in natural resources and is looking for work.

He learned to swim minus his arm and leg while on a holiday in Mexico and recently went alligator hunting with his dad in Louisiana.

He faces more surgery. The skin on the stump of his right arm becomes irritated from the prosthesis and requires further work. Doctors say they can fine-tune some of the plastic surgery on his face by reshaping his nose and chin.

He rarely cries over what happened to him but his Auntie Anne has noticed there is one

exception. Tears sometimes come as he reads a journal kept by friends and family during those dark hours of unconsciousness.

Reading it reminds him of what he put others through. As Curtis puts it, “I felt more sorry for the people that felt sorry for me than I felt sorry for myself.”

When the clouds of worry over Curtis’s survival began to dissipate, a new cloud floated into the horizon. Donna wondered, would her son ever find love?

A relationship with a girl had ended shortly after the accident.

Her answer came about three years ago when Curtis began dating a beautiful young local nurse named Lori Buschman.

She was drawn to him by his sense of humour. “He makes me laugh,” she said, her blue eyes sparkling in a face framed by blond hair. She loves his expressive eyes that shine above scars she doesn’t see.

Sex and the single girl

She has to admit it was a bit weird at first to go to bed with Curtis while his arm and leg lay on the floor.

Other things were weirder still. When the two first met, Curtis still had a catheter. He didn’t let Lori see it but she knew it was there. Being a nurse, it didn’t faze her.

By the time they were ready to attempt sex, the catheter was removed, but they were both more than a little nervous. They had to have

some intimate discussions first.

“It was very awkward,” she admits. “We had to get comfortable talking about it.” In the end, Curtis’s rebuilt parts worked fine.

The two have bought a house together in the Battleford area and are planning to get married June 24. They both want children right after.

Lori knows her boyfriend struggles sometimes. “He has times when he gets discouraged, like when his arm doesn’t work. So I see that part of it. Sometimes, I don’t know what to say because what can you say to make him feel better when you have two arms? But he quickly gets over it. He is very strong. He just keeps going. There is nothing he can’t do.”

To his mother, “he is just Curtis again.”

But friends say they are joined in a circle that will never be broken. Even as the boys head off to jobs and new lives, when they come back, they feel a bond born of triumph over tragedy. The same is true of their parents.

The boys say the accident has taught them not to sweat the small stuff, to appreciate friends and family. Life can change as quickly and unpredictably as a jolt of power.

Said Curtis, “Obviously, I have a greater appreciation for life, like day-to-day life, and I realize that stuff can happen so quickly. I was excited about going to play serious hockey one minute and then the next minute, you have something like that happen. But overall, I don’t think it has changed my attitude. I have always had the attitude that you have to keep trying

things.”

No one is quite sure what saved Curtis. Some say it was the doctors. Others say it was friends and family. “Everyone was so positive around me,” said Curtis. “There was always something positive to look forward to.”

Others say it came down to the courage of one young man.

“Curtis is just a very resilient guy,” said Clapson. “Certainly, lots of times we see patients who don’t have the same sort of personality or inner reserve. They fail and they don’t do very well at all. Even though you get them healed, they don’t participate in society any more.”

Then, too, there was his great family. “There was never any question in their mind that they would give up on Curtis, like never,” said Clapson.

But the plastic surgeon heaps credit, too, on the Canadian medical system. “We’re very lucky with our health care system in Canada. Nowhere else in the world would he have been able to visit world-class surgeons the way he did. Really, where else can you do that so seamlessly?”

For his mother and his younger brother, Curtis’s survival was no less than a miracle. Donna believes her prayer on that bleak night was answered. Said Blaine: “For him to come through it the way he did and do what he is doing.

“Just the heart that he had to keep on going. That is a miracle.”

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When legendary National Hockey League player Gordie Howe and his wife Colleen stopped by for a quick chat with Weber in rehab at City Hospital in Saskatoon in January 2000, they ended up talking for about an hour.



GREG PENDER/SASKATOON STAR PHOENIX

Weber’s friends Jesse Heintz, (left) and Adam Kozlowski kept him company during his long recuperation, playing CDs for him, watching sports and talking.