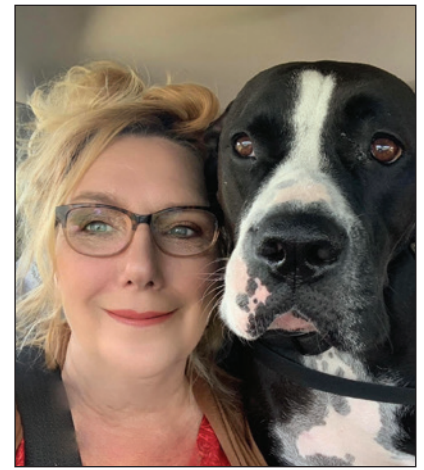


PROFILE



Barb trained her own service dog, Ricco, as a support and companion.

Life's Rocky Road

Threads of Life – the Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support provides hope and healing for individuals and families coping with work-related tragedies. Threads of Life members share their personal experience with workplace fatalities, serious injuries and illness in order to prevent future tragedies and help others to know they're not alone.

If you saw me today, you might not guess it took a monumental effort to reach this point. You could say I climbed a mountain with two broken legs while experiencing a heart attack to get here.

In my previous life, I worked 60 hours a week, and strived to pull more than my weight. I thrived on outdoor activities—boating, gardening, camping, hiking, canoeing, and kayaking. I was never one to lounge on the couch and watch TV. My love for dogs led me to train them and work with animals throughout my younger years. I also shared a passion for restoring classic cars with my husband.

But everything changed on June 4, 2008. I was running late. We've all been there – feeling the pressure to get to work on time. In my haste, I skipped a few of my usual morning routines and hopped in my car. I arrived just five minutes before my shift, greeted my coworkers, shared a few laughs over coffee, and settled into the rhythm of the day.

I worked in a quick-lube business—an

oil change center where customers position their car over an open pit, guided by a lube tech. After eight years in this job, I had walked around those open pits day after day. I recognized the importance of safety for customers, as that was strongly emphasized by the owners: keep all customers in their cars and don't let them walk around while their vehicle is being worked on.

However, none of us took the time to consider safety for the staff. As I walked to grab an air filter from a shelving unit on the other side of the shop, I managed to navigate around two pits without incident. But on my way past the third pit, I slipped—whether on oil or water, I couldn't tell. As I lost my balance, I instinctively reached out to brace myself, but the only place my bracing foot could land was in the open pit. I fell headfirst. Miraculously, I flipped in mid-air and landed on my feet. But the moment I hit the metal catwalk, I knew my life was about to change forever.

I lay at the bottom of that pit, looking up at my coworkers' concerned faces. Soon, I couldn't feel my legs, and shock flooded in. When the paramedics arrived, they asked me a lot of questions. They said they didn't think I had broken my long bones. I replied, "I'm sure I broke everything," while looking at my feet facing the wrong way.

They explained they would have to cut off my pants to get a better look, and

right then, I started to laugh out of nervousness. I remembered that I was running late for work and hadn't worn underwear, even though my mother always warned me to. All my male coworkers were gathered above me, watching the ordeal. I said to the paramedic, "First of all, I don't want to see my legs; I know how bad they are. Secondly, I don't want my coworkers to see me naked!" He laughed to reassure me, saying, "Your legs can't be that bad or you would have passed out, and I'll cover you with a sheet."

Once they'd cut my pants, the paramedic told me I had compound fractures of both legs. Soon, six firefighters arrived to coordinate my extraction from the oily and slippery pit. They talked and joked with me about my lack of clothing, all to keep me distracted from the pain and shock.

At the hospital, I was rushed into surgery, which took seven hours to stabilize my legs with metal plates, pins, and screws. I woke up to the realization that I would not be going back to work the next day with crutches. I was kept for two days and then sent home in a wheelchair, with both legs wrapped and in splints to keep them stable, along with instructions to not walk or bear weight at all.

My home was not wheelchair accessible in any way. I could not fit through my bathroom doors, and I didn't have ramps to get around my house. I was then taken to my mother's home,

which was accessible, thinking I would be back home in no time. But on the second day, I had a blood clot or a piece of plaque that might have broken free from an artery from the fall, which caused a ‘widowmaker’ heart attack. I was rushed back to the hospital by the same paramedics and firefighters. They found me in traction with my legs up in the air and no undergarments on. It was becoming a pattern with me and firefighters, and we all joked to lighten the situation. I remember them calling me “Britney Spears” because she was in the news that week for not wearing underwear while exiting a limo.

When I woke up after an eight-hour heart surgery, I was informed that I could not use my arms for six weeks. I thought, “What? I have no legs, and now no arms to use! How am I going to eat, drink, or get around in my wheelchair?”

They released me from the hospital into the care of my husband, who worked on call and never knew when he would be home, so he passed me on to my aging mother. I was taken back to her care with more home healthcare support.

I soon realized it was going to be a long, hard road to recovery. I underwent 20 more hours of surgeries on my legs to strengthen and stabilize them. About every six months, I would face another setback in my recovery process. Just when I would see the light at the end of the tunnel, it seemed to be pushed further away, with new hills and curves added to my journey. Yet, I refused to let those challenges deter me. My determi-

nation grew stronger, and I embraced the journey, knowing that each struggle brought me one step closer to walking without pain. It took over three years of daily physiotherapy to help me take my first steps. I was told that after three years, I had reached maximum recovery, but I couldn’t accept that. I kept pushing to improve myself and my functional abilities.

One day I was waiting in my wheelchair for my mom to pick me up after a therapy session. I saw a woman who appeared to be homeless, yelling at the sky. Then the woman approached me, put her hands on my head and yelled “Please, Jesus, heal this woman! Help her walk again!” I wasn’t much of a believer, but I didn’t want to upset the lady and make the situation worse. I saw my mom waiting in her car, so I stood up from my wheelchair, held on to the hood of the car and took baby steps to the car door. I could see the physiotherapy staff watching through the window, clapping and laughing. I took more steps that day than I had so far, so in a way the woman did heal me! Yes, the Lord or the universe works in mysterious ways.

After I discovered I could take a few steps, I grew braver and started working through the pain. I started in the grocery store, and over many years expanded my endurance from the produce section to the meat department and finally the frozen food section. When I hit my limit my husband would take me home and then go back to finish the shopping.

After being mainly confined to my home

for over four years, I experienced panic attacks in certain situations, and my family couldn’t always be with me so I decided to train my own service dog as a form of therapy for myself. Ricco turned out to be the best service dog I could have asked for—opening doors for me, picking up items I dropped, and going to get my phone for me. I could lean on him for balance when there was no railing or going up and down stairs. One night, we went for a training and family walk down to the waterfront, and there was a boat full of firefighters practicing drills. As I approached the dock, I could hear the men yell, “Hey Britney, how are you doing?” I had to laugh—they remembered me, not my real name, but close enough. I still have limits to how much walking I can do. I had to renovate my entire house to accommodate my disabilities—grab bars everywhere, new accessible bathrooms, wider doorways, ramps, and a van conversion so I can drive myself places.

My occupational therapist helped me acquire medical aids and adjustments to make my life better, allowing me to accomplish much more in a day and giving me back my freedom to function almost as I did before my work accident.

My life’s road has been rocky and steep at times compared to some people, but it all could have been avoided. Let my story be a reminder that accidents can happen to anyone, but by staying vigilant, we can prevent them.

Barb Dexter and Threads of Life