

Keeping the Black Dog at bay

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Robert Sibley

Since René Faucher was paralysed during a game of pickup hockey in January, he has fought hard not to surrender to despair. He has no choice, he tells Robert Sibley, because 'the minute the mind stops progressing, the body is sure to follow.'

The nights were the worst. René Faucher would lie in bed unable to move, feeling no sensation in his body, helpless, alone. There was only his mind to keep him company, and it skittered on the edge of despair.

Would he never walk again? How would the family survive? Who would pay the bills? Would he ever feel again? Even when sleep came, there was little relief. He would snap awake in the darkness of his hospital room, his mind thrashing against nightmares that threatened to smother all hope.

In late January, the father of three was playing a game of pickup hockey at the University of Ottawa when a skate caught a rut in the ice. Before he could throw up his arms to protect himself, he slammed headfirst into the boards. After emergency surgery, doctors told him he'd sustained a severe spinal cord injury that left him paralysed from the neck down. He might never walk again, or, perhaps, breathe without mechanical assistance.

Such a prognosis would reduce many to utter despair. And, for a time, confined to a hospital bed, paralysed and immobile, Faucher endured dark days -- and darker nights. "I didn't like going to bed because I was alone with my thoughts. All those negative thoughts. I'd start to think about finances or other stuff. I'd worry about waking up in the middle of the night and being alone. The nightmares were pretty bad."

Today, nearly five months later, the nightmares are a fading memory, and fear of the future has given way to greater confidence and optimism. To be sure, Faucher remains confined to a wheelchair, dependent on others for many basic needs, and, some nights, the Black Dog of depression howls. But after months of determined rehabilitation, the 40-year-old has regained sensation throughout his body and recovered some muscle strength and movement. Where once he couldn't hold, much less pick up, a pen or cup, he now writes, uses his iPhone and pours his own drinks.

"Four months ago, I couldn't feel anything and I couldn't move anything. I had some limited motion in my arms and hands, but that was it. Now I can feel all over to varying degrees," he says, beaming as he shows that he can make the muscles around his knees twitch.

Faucher has been living at the Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre since late February. His days are devoted to physiotherapy, weightlifting sessions, swimming, pool therapy, occupational therapy to help with fine motor skills, and psychological counselling.

He figures he lost 30 pounds in the weeks immediately after the accident, and even now it's evident he has lost considerable muscle mass. He looks like a rail-thin version of George Clooney. Yet, his eyes are bright and there's colour in his face and there's strength returning to his handshake. "My chest, my back, my legs; you can actually see the muscles now."

But Faucher's slow recovery isn't only physical. "I am learning that a healthy mind is the most important part in this healing process. The minute the mind stops progressing, the body is sure to follow."

The doctors, he recalls, told him he should prepare for the worst -- never walking again. But Faucher, named as one of Ottawa's Top-40-under-40 high-tech entrepreneurs by the Ottawa Business Journal in 2005, wasn't

going quietly into that dark prognosis. "I said to myself, 'OK, you prepare yourself for the worst, but then mentally you drive yourself to thinking, 'I'm going to do all the exercise and the physio so I can have my muscles back in a year or two years.' You visualize yourself getting better."

Faucher credits much of his recovery so far to the support of others, particularly his wife, Dianne Douglas, and their friends. But he's also grateful to the many Ottawans who've come forward with support, advice and encouragement. "My biggest allies have been family and friends and the community. Having so many people donating their time and even sending their best wishes; it's provided the kind of positive energy that really helps me stay upbeat."

Indeed, the response of strangers has been one of the positives in Faucher's plight. At the time of his accident, Faucher was between jobs and without the safety net of an income or disability insurance. But over the past four months numerous individuals and organizations have eased the family's financial concerns. The hockey fraternity-- from the National Hockey League and Senators alumni to the Elder Skatesmen and the Platt League Tournament-- hit the ice, as it were, to raise money for the Faucher-Douglas Trust Fund. Many local businesses such as the Foundation Restaurant and Brad Marsh's Bar-B-Q and Grill held fundraisers.

Individuals helped, too. For example, Dean Usher, the manager of the CIBC Wood Gundy office in Kanata, organized the Freedom Van Campaign, raising \$40,000 in 40 days so Faucher and Douglas could buy a specially equipped van. Another acquaintance, Martin Masse, with the law firm Lang Michener, is organizing a golf tournament for late August.

Faucher is grateful, to say the least. "People have been incredible. It gives me a great feeling to think how lucky I am to live in this city." The fundraising relieved him of short-term money concerns. He and Dianne were able to sell their old house and buy a Kanata bungalow that will better accommodate his condition. "I'm really looking forward to living at home again."

Ottawans have also been generous in spirit. Faucher lauds the Rehabilitation Centre staff-- "they've taken care of me and taught me how to take care of myself" -- but he's found others, too, to aid his recovery.

For instance, Doug Smith, a former NHL hockey player who has largely recovered from a severe spinal cord injury 18 years ago, has been a "tremendous help" with advice and encouragement. Smith also introduced him to Dr. Tom Tomlinson, an osteopath who taught him various exercises "to continue moving forward." Add the internationally recognized acupuncturist Zhaoqi Guo, at the Sino Acupuncture Clinic, a massage therapist, Sarah Drader, and a naturopath, Dr. Mark Orbay, and you have Faucher's "outside team."

"I really depend on these people," he says.

One technique Faucher acquired from his outside team -- and one he thinks crucial to his progress-- is visualization, using mental imagery to encourage the body's healing. "I've noticed a pattern in those who've recovered from my kind of injury. They all pushed themselves mentally as well as physically. You have to visualize your body healing and getting stronger."

Faucher is aware that at the physical level the damaged nerves in his spinal cord that control muscles and sensation are slowly rejuvenating, allowing electrical impulses to reach other parts of his body and strengthen his muscles and restore sensation. Nonetheless, he is convinced that much of his recovery is psychological.

"For the body to heal, it helps to have a positive state of mind. If you're depressed your immune system is weakened and your body channels energy to deal with it. You don't have energy for healing. So I try to stay positive."

It's not always easy. Some days the Black Dog bites. "Last week was a bad one. The negativity just came back." In these moments Faucher is hammered by the awareness that everything -- taking a walk around the block, pouring cream in his coffee, going to the bathroom -- is just so damn much work.

"There's always this internal battle between the positive and the negative. One side wants to focus on the positive, but the other side still has the doubt and fear. You think it's all such an effort, and you know it's going to be like this for a long time. And then everything just sort of cascades. You get pulled into this spiral of doubt and negative thinking."

How does he escape the spiral? If anyone is proof positive of that old Barbra Streisand lyric -- "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world" -- it's Faucher. "You turn to others," he says. "You can't keep it inside. You've got to get it out, verbalize it. I talk to others who've recovered like Doug (Smith), or to my wife or friends. By talking it through with somebody, especially the positive things, you pull yourself out of the spiral."

Faucher also has his own little escape techniques, like going shopping or having a beer. Some days he flees the centre, bundling himself and his wheelchair into a taxi-van and heading downtown. Last week, for instance, he wheeled himself to a restaurant in the Market for a few beers with friends. "It's good to get out and not spend all my time in the hospital. I don't have time to feel sorry for myself."

And then there are the nights. Faucher has learned a few techniques to deal with the night. When he goes to bed, he avoids "spinal cord injury thoughts" by reading books on his Kindle (it's easier to hold than a book) -- Michael Lewis's *The Big Short* and Gregory Zuckerman's *The Greatest Trade Ever* were recent reads -- or watching movies on his laptop. When he feels sleep coming on, he closes his eyes and visualizes the future.

"I look forward to going to bed now. Just before I go to sleep I visualize myself walking again with my kids in the park or them swimming around me at the lake.

"I usually sleep through the night. No more nightmares."

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