

Excerpts from *My Decision to Live*

By Nader Elguindi

Staring Death in the Eye...and Surviving

At 5 a.m. on Sunday, November 20, 1994, a couple driving...on the Hawaiian island of Oahu saw a motorcycle lying on its side in the right-hand shoulder of the freeway. The headlamp was lit and facing oncoming traffic...and discovered me lying on the ground, barely conscious but alive. Both my legs were severed below the knee and there was blood everywhere. My motorcycle had collided violently with an exit sign at freeway speed... The call went out for an emergency helicopter.... I underwent more than eighteen hours of emergency surgery, during which both legs were reattached. Only my head – I had a helmet on – and right arm had been spared from injury. I endured two legs reattached below the knees, one broken femur, severed nerves in my left arm, and internal injuries that required the removal of my appendix.... I reached out to God for strength.... I could have died that day, but I didn't. I was spared for a reason, one that would fuel my will to continue and to live, even today. (pp. 4-5)

Lucky to be Alive!?!?

Some days...are frozen in time. Crystallized. The sights, sounds, smells, and gut sensation of those moments are tangible realities, even years afterward. One of those moments for me was when I woke up on November 22, 1994...lying in a hospital bed, my life changed entirely. My gaze drifted to the foot of my bed, and I suddenly realized that my parents were standing there...this was the first time in eighteen years I'd seen them together. They had divorced when I was young, and over the years my relationship with both of them had become strained.... I heard footsteps, and a tall man in a white lab coat appeared at the side of my hospital bed.... "Son, you've been in a terrible accident and you're lucky to be alive." *Lucky*. It rang in my head like an echo in a long, dark tunnel. How in the world was this luck? Was he out of his mind? (pp. 3-4)

Forging a Path on My Own

In school I became a troublemaker and welcomed confrontation. I was small and a stranger almost wherever I went so I became a magnet for trouble.... With my own car, I left in dramatic fashion to go find Jeff and Randy, two friends I knew were out and about. Randy managed to get his hands on a bottle of tequila from his dad's liquor cabinet and we proceeded to do shots with lime chasers... We finished the whole bottle among the three of us. I found myself in rare and unsightly shape. I got sick that night, and my friend drove me home and left me in the driveway of my mom's house...I attempted to go inside the house without disrupting anyone only to create an awful confrontation with my mom. In my drunken stupor, I tried to blame the vomiting on food poisoning but she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that I had been drinking. The next day, beyond all hope that either of us was doing any good for the other, she asked me to leave the house. Almost happy to finally have the triggering moment to leave home, I packed my bags and left. I believed I would find a way. (pp. 25-27)

You May Never Walk Again

"When can I go back to work?" I asked. [The doctor] hung up his clipboard and pulled a chair over to the side of the bed.... I imagine that this must be one of the most difficult things a doctor has to do – one that keeps them up nights when they're hard at work in medical school...I wish he could know what he gave me by being so direct and finally telling me what I had been expecting to hear. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "I have some bad news, son. You may never walk again." As soon as he said those words, I was filled with a level of determination I had not known before. This jolt of realism gave me a brief moment of clarity... I was ready to rise to the challenge, determined to defy all odds, knowing that my faith would carry me. I had been looking for hope and promises of getting better, and although I got the opposite, it was what I needed to continue fighting. (p. 9)

A Second Chance at Life

The day following my amputation surgery, I woke up and felt *alive*... For the first time since the accident, eight days ago, death was not toying with my body. I had lost 90 pounds and was a frail skeleton of my previous 180-pound frame, but I felt strong and somehow knew things were going to be okay. My body had gone through thirteen surgeries since the wreck and I was still hazy from the morphine drip, but I was alive. I felt a great shift take place, a wave of positive energy. I closed my eyes and tried to absorb the moment.... Although I was still in great pain and only starting to heal, I finally felt lucky to be alive. I had been given a second chance and realized that from now on, I would see the world differently, almost having it taken from me. I was aware of where I'd been, where I was now, and what I needed to do – I was not only going to live, I was going to have my life back. (pp. 13, 16)

Sacrifice and Support

Commander Mark W. Kenny, the Captain of USS *Birmingham* where I was stationed, visited me that afternoon as he had every day since my accident. He and my other shipmates were my second family... I declared to Commander Kenny, "I want to go back to the boat, sir. I am not finished with my Navy career." Without hesitation he said, "Whatever you need, Nader. We'll support you." Just like that, without blinking, he was ready to do anything he could to help. It took me years to learn the magnitude of his support. He, along with the shipmates on my boat, would make the choice to operate short-handed while I recovered from the accident in order to give me an opportunity to come back. (p. 15)

The Unspoken Bond

Several of my friends were going to the San Diego Zoo... I put on my shorts, grabbed my cane...and we headed out. We spent the day strolling around the zoo... I was exhausted from all the...and I started wondering [when I would walk]...like a normal person. Then I heard a man's voice. "Look Joe, he's got a leg just like you"... The boy, who couldn't have been older than five, had a prosthetic foot on his right leg. It was flesh-colored and inconspicuous, and...there was the hint of a slight limp. I felt an instant bond with the small boy and waved to him....he smiled and waved back. It dawned on me that this is who I would be for the rest of my life. Forever an amputee and part of another community of people in the world. Knowing that others like myself were out there was comforting. I became inspired by the young boy who was probably born without a leg. (pp. 116-117)

For the First Time in my Life – I was Whole

[N]ot far from where I had first met the Birmingham when I reported two years earlier... Joined by my shipmates...I walked to the front of the ceremony... I tried to hold in my enthusiasm for accomplishing a goal that I had worked so hard for....my Captain pinned the gold colored dolphins on my shirt just above my left breast pocket....and gave me an opportunity to speak briefly: "I could not have done it without each and every one of you. First and foremost, I want to thank Captain Kenny, without whose support this chance would not be possible. To my family, crew members and friends, who supported me along the way. And finally, to God, for giving me a second chance"... Commander Kenny tacked a gold dolphin pin on my uniform, signifying that I was officially a qualified submarine officer. I was the first U.S. naval officer to come back after an amputation and qualify for dolphins on a nuclear submarine....for the first time in my life, I felt completely whole. (p. 126)

Fighting to Remain a Navy Man

I made my desires official when the Navy liaison officer visited... "we need to start talking about the medical retirement process," she said. "You will be formally discharged and the VA will manage your health care for the rest of your life." "But what will I do?" I asked. "What else *can* I do? The Navy is my life. This is who I am and what I want to be." "Well, you can appeal our decision." She explained the process and then I was required to sign a release waiving my medical retirement. Instead of accepting the medical retirement, I opted to challenge the Physical Evaluation Board (PEB) to continue on active duty once I was healthy. (pp. 77-78)

Letting Go

No one before me had attempted to stay on active duty as a submarine officer with a prosthetic leg, so we were all covering new ground.... That second report went to the PEB in the fall of 1996, almost two years after my accident... Dr. Murray slid a three-page report across the desk.... [and] said...I am sorry, Lieutenant, but the PEB has denied your request once again.” I was dumbfounded.... I could appeal again, giving it one last chance, but the third time would be the final result. I had already lost two years in recovery...I was in danger of losing more years fighting the PEB without success, and, worst of all, Dr. Murray informed me that the PEB could make a decision that would require me to work a desk job instead of being able to work on submarines, which was my true passion. I spent the next few weeks weighing my options...I told the senior doctor, “I don’t want to risk working a desk job, so I will take my chances in the civilian world.” With that final decision, Dr. Murray accepted the findings from the PEB and mailed them back to Washington, D.C. Within six months, I was medically discharged from the Navy and, sadly, sent home. (pp. 129-131)

Nader begins his Company – Cydecor

My sister...suggested I go to a class about starting your own business that was offered by the local community college. I certainly had nothing better to do and the class, which only cost \$20, was an easy decision.... After class adjourned, I went to the front to speak with [the teacher]. Much to my surprise, Louis informed me that he was taking over another business called Parker Athletic and wanted to know about my experience with building websites.... I call[ed] him to set up a meeting...[and] we talked about building a new e-commerce website for his business. With limited experience but a lot of research online, I created a proposal for Parker Athletic, which would be my first major project. (p. 136)

The Technology Bubble Bursts

Somehow, in spite of the turnover and tight labor market, we kept the business growing. By the end of 1999 our staff reached eighteen employees.... My investment in Cydecor committed us to the business plan at hand for several years to come.... I am amazed at how everything started from a project at Parker Athletic.... In March of 2000...the NASDAQ stock market crashed in what history now refers to as the bursting of the tech bubble.... By the fall of 2000, I had laid off half our staff and Cydecor went from eighteen to nine employees in just two months.... Then, in September 2001...the United States was hit with the worst terrorist attack in our history. Our consulting business seemed to come to an abrupt halt. Suddenly, no one was interested in talking about new projects. It took months before things even picked up slightly, so Cydecor cut its staff to the bare minimum and we did all we could to survive as a company. (pp. 140-142)

Coming Full Circle – Serving My Beloved Navy Again

This document was the largest RFP I had been exposed to and was easily over 100 pages. For the first few hours, I just stared at it in awe. The fleeting moment of finally having arrived into government contracting was surpassed by the daunting task of addressing the proposal. In a moment of panic, I called Bob Osterhoudt at SAIC....The next call I received from Bob summoned me to get to their office outside of D.C. as quickly as possible. The RFP was due in thirty days and we did not have time to waste.... At the end of May, we presented our mutual Cydecor and SAIC proposal to the ONR offices...by mid-July I started pondering how ONR would announce the news... On September 9, 2004, we received the following in a letter from ONR...Congratulations! This letter is to inform you that based on your submitted proposal; your firm has received a...[c]ontract... Cydecor...was rejuvenated. We had overcome adversity despite a huge obstacle. Ten years after an accident that nearly took my life and certainly changed my career, I was back serving the Navy again – this time as an entrepreneur and government contractor - helping those with whom I used to serve. (pp. 147-150)

For more information on *My Decision to Live*, or to schedule an interview with Nader, please contact Kristen Schremp at Kristen@kaspublicity.com or (703) 928-5527