

This memoir chronicles the life of Gene R. Rodgers who became permanently paralyzed at age 17. The author regales readers with professional, adventure and entrepreneurial quests that have earned him the moniker, AWESOME.

Awesome by Accident:

How adapting to a "tragic accident" led me to create my extraordinary life

By Gene R. Rodgers

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A photograph of a person in a wheelchair rappelling down a rope next to a rock climber on a cliff face. The person in the wheelchair is on the left, suspended by a rope. The rock climber is on the right, clinging to the dark, textured rock face. The background shows a clear sky and a hazy landscape with hills at the bottom.

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About the Author



As a wheelchair user, I've traveled in 44 countries and island nations, on six continents, and on several oceans. I've sailed on many types of ships including tall-ships, a Chinese junk, and a catamaran with aluminum air-foil sails. I've enjoyed diverse recreational activities including skydiving, snow skiing, sailing, scuba diving, paragliding, and trekking in the Himalayas on an expedition to Mt. Everest Base Camp.

I've worked in several states and earned a merit award for designing a database. Working full-time, and later as an entrepreneur provided funding for my adventures.

I've earned several college degrees and a Switzer Fellowship from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. I did all this after becoming almost totally paralyzed at age 17.

I've learned to thrive on all sorts of adventure. Put me in a country ten thousand miles from home, where I don't know the language or culture, and I'll feel quite comfortable. Being paralyzed gave me an additional perspective on adventure. Just leaving familiar surroundings and whatever support system I managed to build, only to start all over again in another city has been adventurous. To find accessible lodging and dependable attendants everywhere I went proved even more daunting.

Now, 50 years post-injury, I'm happy to share my journey with you, in the hope you will benefit from my experience. To understand how I was able to do all that I have done, it's necessary to share my humble beginnings and the experiences that shaped my life because every experience seemed to build on the one before it. I learned from every loss and pushed my boundaries to dangerous limits. I did many things not necessarily because I wanted to, but because I needed to. I hope my story will help propel you to your own successes in life.

Gene R. Rodgers

Note: I typed this manuscript using a mouse stick.

Table of Contents

A Rocky Start	1
Growing Up.....	15
Life on 4B.....	29
4B What Doesn't Kill You ..	35
4B The Cast of Characters	37
4B The Patients.....	42
4B Drama on the Ward.....	46
4B Homeward Bound.....	51
4B College Bound.....	53
Home	55
What Would Jesus Say?	59
Health	65
Birds of a Feather	69
Schoolwork	89
Beyond Schoolwork.....	95
Way Beyond Schoolwork	99
My Sweetheart.....	105
Relationships in General	111

Ties that Bind.....	115
The Right Moves	127
Finding My Proper Grove	153
"Buy" the Numbers.....	175
The Cost of Being Disabled.....	179
Time for Reflection	183
Winning.....	207
Things I Say.....	229
Lessons Learned.....	233
Traveling the Disabled Argonaut Way	241
Attendants	285
An Argonaut's End Game.....	289
My Friends' Perspectives	293
Acknowledgements	299

A Rocky Start

Moving through the hallways on a gurney flat on my back, I saw the clean, white ceiling clearly. Next, I spotted people in hospital attire, which confirmed my suspicions: I was indeed inside a hospital. I couldn't move, but I didn't know why. Nor was I compelled to inquire about what had happened to me. It all felt too surreal, too dream-like, to utter words.

We rolled through the halls, passing door after door and room after room until we came to an empty room, into which I was rolled. There were no other occupants. Other than the nurses and nurse's aides, there were no distractions. I was content to sleep in the hope I would wake up from this weird dream soon.

But I felt paralyzed: I couldn't feel a thing. For the moment that didn't seem alarming. Just all a part of this other-worldly dream.

Shortly after taking up residency in this new room, a team of nurse's aides came in. They told me they were going to turn me. I didn't know what that meant, but for some reason, I didn't particularly care. It held no context for me yet.

I quickly learned that when they said "turn," they meant rotating me on a circle electric bed. They were going to turn me, they said, so I didn't develop pressure sores. *Pressure sores?* Assuming this to be "nurse speak," I figured they would tell me what the term meant later if it was really all that important.

They put a metal, canvas-covered frame over the top of me. Sandwiched into the bottom frame, I had metal tongs — much like ice tongs — inserted into my skull. These were attached to weights to provide traction to keep my neck in place.

When the nurse's aides were confident that the top piece of the frame was secured to the bottom, they pressed a button and the bed started to turn like a giant hamster wheel. It slowly rotated until I was turned straight up, and then over, facing the floor. There was spacing in the canvas, so I had room to see the floor. Only then was I able to see the weights hanging from my head.

I was able to move my mouth somewhat and talk. Still oblivious to what had happened to put me in this situation, I remained semi-incurious and disbelieving. I just wanted to sleep. I wanted them to darken the room so I could sleep.

This can't be happening to me. If it were, I would feel it, but I can't feel anything. I never asked for this.

Whenever I did wake up, I thought I would be able to carry on as I always had, going outside, practicing archery, maybe getting my brother Mike and my friend Bruce to go camping with me.

For now, though, I'd close my eyes and sleep.

Every two hours, nurse's aides would return to my room, sandwich me between two frames, and rotate me again. Two hours face up; two hours face down.

This went on all day, all week, for a whole month.

While I was face down in this contraption, some of my friends came to visit. Lauri, a dear friend from school, would lay on the floor looking up at me as we carried on what sounded like normal conversation. But we had to temporarily pause the conversation whenever blood dripped from the tongs in my skull onto the floor, narrowly missing her. The dripping blood didn't bother me, but I could tell she was deeply concerned. That bothered me. I didn't want my friends to be alarmed by my present predicament.

One day was particularly bad. One of the metal tongs slipped and came out of the hole in my head as I was turned, so they had to re-drill the hole immediately. It was the same hole, but they had to drill it deeper to keep the tong from coming out again. They did this all while I was awake, without anesthetic.

Surely, they will take a moment to administer a local anesthetic, at least? (No.)

I cringed when I heard the drill start up. Then I could smell the burning bone and feel my skull vibrate as the drill was pushed into my skull. *What the hell kind of drill do they use on someone's skull?* I was afraid the drill might go through my skull and into my brain.

The doctors acted like this was routine. Perhaps it was routine for them, but for me, it was hell. Having experience with handheld drills, I knew that they're dangerous to operate and could be dangerous to my head. One simple slip and I could lose the ability to speak. Slip a little more, and I could lose my mental acuity, perhaps even my life.

If I were in prison instead of a hospital, this kind of treatment would be considered cruel and inhumane.

My parents were allowed to visit, but not my siblings. As the second oldest of seven children and just 17, most of my siblings were at an impressionable age. Conventional wisdom dictated that my younger brothers and sisters wouldn't understand why I had these medieval-looking tongs stuck into my head. Seeing that could traumatize them.

Many years later, I contacted some of my siblings to hear their reactions when they were told about my situation. Both of my younger sisters remembered my dad telling them, on the day I was injured, that he had to go to the hospital because I had broken my leg. Both sisters knew that to be a lie. (I prefer to think that was the information conveyed to my parents by hospital staff to keep them sane on the way in, to prevent an auto accident.) Either way, my sisters, even at the tender ages of 11 and 13, knew something wasn't right.

My two sisters and four brothers stayed with neighbors that night. My siblings did get to see me at Cleveland Metro shortly after my accident. My understanding is that they were allowed to see me because the doctors didn't know how long I was going to live.

My youngest sister, Pam, was indeed traumatized when she saw the metal tongs in my head. Mindy, two years

older than Pam, was able to understand the situation somewhat but she was stunned by the tongs and questioned what the family could do to help me.

My brother Mike, one year my junior, was livid. He questioned why this had to happen to me.

When Pam visited, she was horrified by the sight of other patients. We were still steeped in the Vietnam War, and casualties were brought back with grotesque facial disfigurements, missing limbs, and other medical issues. Many were visible in the hallways of Cleveland Metro.

Pam hoped I wouldn't have to face a similar hell. She made me get well cards. My friends formed prayer groups and took turns baby-sitting my brothers and sisters. Friends and anonymous good Samaritans contributed, directly or indirectly, to my recovery.

My mother cried a lot. Pam has tried to repress memories of my mother crying. Pam was traumatized just seeing my mom in such distress over my condition. My poor mother! Of course, she cried. She didn't know if I would live or die. And if I lived, she didn't know what quality of life I would have.

A month later, I was still alive, so my friends planned a fundraiser to help support my family and me emotionally and financially. Since most of my friends were involved in theater, they wrote and presented a musical, "From Bach to Rock," a play about the history of music. That event was phenomenally successful.

Bruce Michalski and Marsha Clark took the lead on that play. As part of the play, Bruce created a band called The Fabulous Brylcreams, which subsequently stayed together and played for many years. They held other fundraisers, too, but the musical was the most memorable. They went to extraordinary lengths to help my family and me.

Sometime during my stay at Cleveland Metropolitan, I learned I had fractured my neck at the 4th, 5th and 6th cervical levels and severed my spinal cord completely, hence the paralysis. It would take months before I learned how much movement I would get back. I had also cracked my skull and broken my shoulder blade.

The top 8 vertebra are cervical. My left side was determined to be C-4, which meant that I was totally paralyzed from the nipple line down with zero sensation on the paralyzed side. On the right side, I showed signs of C-5 and C-6 abilities and associated sensation. I could

lift my right arm slightly but had poor wrist extension. I couldn't straighten either arm. I had no triceps. There was no hope, ever, of me regaining function below that level.

I later learned that, during my first week in the hospital, I was told I would be paralyzed for life, but that information was lost to me. It seems I woke up a different person. I forgot everything that happened the first two weeks after I was injured, so I had to relearn it all.

It was a terribly odd feeling. I couldn't remember those two weeks, but I was treated by hospital staff as if I knew it all. I think I learned what had happened, in bits and pieces, from various people, mostly my mother. I was finally able to start processing the facts, a process that would take more than a year.

Many months later, I learned I could still get an erection. I was paralyzed, but my body still responded to stimuli. So, I had that going for me. I couldn't chase pretty girls, but I could still respond to their touch. The ability to have sex remain crucial to most of the guys who are seriously injured. As for me, I mostly just wanted to be able to play football and go camping again.

I couldn't control my bowels or bladder, so the physical injuries were only part of my newfound hell. The psychological injuries plagued me for years, and still do at times, but to a lesser extent. Getting used to incontinence and others' help with one's hygiene is no picnic.

Years later, I learned I had come close to death while I was in the hospital. My sister Pam recalled that my Dad got a phone call from Parma Hospital, who told him I'd had an accident. Dad immediately grabbed his keys and sprinted to his van. Mom couldn't figure out what he was doing, and he told her I had an accident and was at Parma Hospital. She leaped into action then, too.

When they got to the emergency room, they were told I had a broken leg and clavicle. At that time, they were unaware of the extent of my injuries.

During this time, Dr. White, a prominent neurosurgeon, literally bumped into my mom and, surprised, asked why she was there. They knew each other because my mom had been a switchboard operator in that hospital for many years. Dr. White talked to the emergency room doctor and, after a cursory exam, told them that I needed to be transferred to the brand-new Cleveland

Metro General Hospital because it was the only hospital with a spinal cord unit.

Hours earlier, I had been with my friends celebrating the end of our junior year in high school at Valley Forge High School, just outside Cleveland, Ohio. A group of my friends decided to have a picnic to celebrate finishing our junior year. Most of us were Thespians involved in theater, some as actors, some working on the stage or with props. We consoled each other when someone didn't get the part in the plays they tried out for, and we celebrated when someone did get the part they wanted. We were tight, or *thick as thieves* as the saying goes.

So, we all headed to Hinckley Reservation to go to Whipp's Ledges. I was very much an outdoors person and enjoyed exercise, so I had decided to ride my 10-speed bike there while the others took motorized vehicles.

The day started off fine. It was a clear sunny day, and I was looking forward to spending time with my friends.

After I met up with them at Whipp's Ledges, it wasn't long before we broke out the food and drinks (non-alcoholic) and started throwing around a softball.

At some point, I decided to wander off to the sandstone cliffs to do a little exploring on my own. I was separated from the others, out of their sight. I was always content wandering around by myself and enjoying solo activities.

The next thing I knew, I was being wheeled through the halls of the hospital on some sort of bed. I had fallen off a 42' 10" cliff. (The Rangers measured the distance for their records.) I had fallen straight down and landed on solid rock. In addition to breaking my neck, I had cracked my skull and broken my right shoulder. No one saw me go over the edge.

Fortunately, there was a climber at the base of the cliff who watched as I fell. He was able to stabilize me until help came.

From what I understand, getting EMS (Emergency Medical Services) was another adventure. Back in 1972, there were no cellphones or GPS. But somehow the climber had to find one of my friends and alert them to summon medical help.

It was hard for them to tell the EMS where we were exactly, because we were in a large park. Even with precise instructions, EMS would still have a hard time following instructions to reach me at the base of a cliff.

I drifted in and out of consciousness, but when anyone asked me a question I could answer, although two weeks later, I had absolutely no memory of the fall or of my recovery from the bottom of the cliff.

After I was brought to the emergency room, my parents were told where I was and asked to get to the hospital asap to sign some forms so I could receive immediate surgery.

I was operated on by Dr. Robert White, one of the best neurosurgeons in the state. He performed a laminectomy and anterior fusion, which required taking a piece of my hip bone to fuse my vertebrae together to prevent further damage to my spinal cord.

Sometime during my first two weeks at Cleveland Metropolitan, I was told I would be totally paralyzed the rest of my life. But I forgot. Perhaps this explains why, when I awoke in my new environment on the hamster bed, I didn't feel compelled to ask about my injury or prognosis.

Before realizing I would be totally paralyzed for life, I did realize that I had an injury that would take time to heal. I wondered how it would affect the pursuit of my passions in life.

Eager to find out how limited my life would be, I asked the doctor if my injury would limit my ability to play football or lift weights. He said yes, turned around, and left the room. **He knew I'd be totally paralyzed! Why didn't he just discuss that with me?**

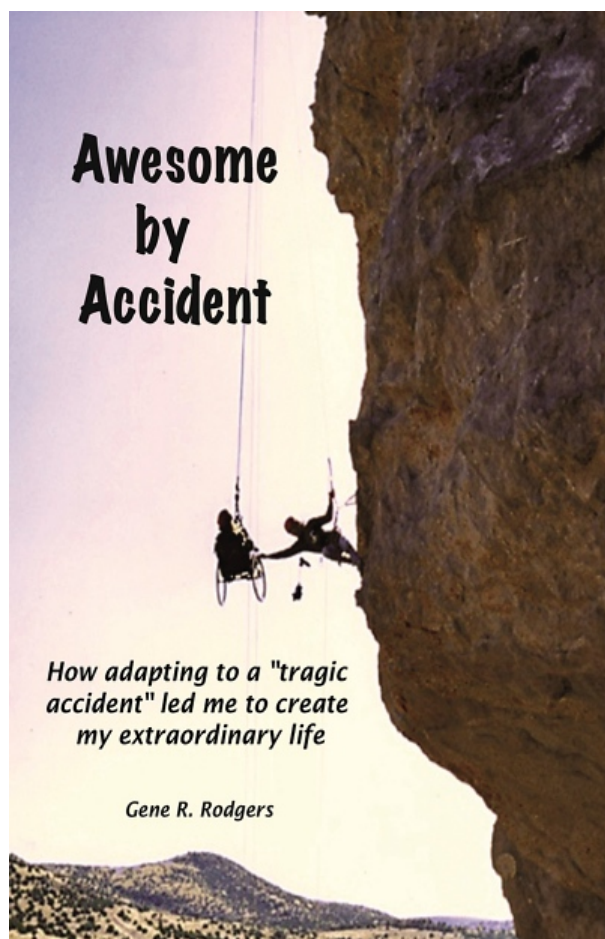
During my hospital confinement, I often wondered how it was possible to have fallen off a cliff. With a healthy respect for Mother Nature and all the possible dangers associated with the outdoors, I've been on cliffs before, and always careful to step only where the rock is solid. The ground was dry, so I don't believe I slipped. So, how did I go over the edge?

That question haunted me for many years. In fact, I was so consumed with it that later, when I was in college, I saw a hypnotist to attempt regression hypnosis, in the hope he could bring back some memories. Unfortunately, it didn't work.

Years after my injury, my mother recounted that she observed that I wasn't acting quite right on the day I left for Hinckley. She told my father to keep an eye on me and to make sure I didn't go anywhere. We all know how that day ended up.

That would explain why she has held my father responsible for my accident ever since.

And many years later, my younger brother, Mike, told me he learned about two students who had allegedly pushed me off the cliff. I blamed no one then, and cannot confirm anyone to blame now, as if blaming and shaming would do any of us any good. I presume that, if I was pushed, the people who pushed me are living their own private hells as a result of their temporary insanity.



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