

*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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The background of the book cover is a photograph of two people rappelling down a rope next to a large, dark rock face. One person is in a wheelchair, and the other is a rock climber. The scene is set against a clear sky and a hilly landscape in the distance.

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**SECOND EDITION**

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## About the Author



As a wheelchair user, I've traveled to 44 countries and island nations, been on six continents, and several oceans. I've sailed on many types of ships. With the assistance of specially trained individuals, I've enjoyed diverse recreational activities including, skydiving, snow skiing, sailing, scuba diving, paragliding, and 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 was awarded the 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. Leaving my familiar surroundings, and whatever support system I managed to build, only to start all over again in another city, has been adventurous. However, finding accessible lodging and dependable attendants everywhere I went proved significantly daunting.

Now, 50 years post-injury, I'm happy to share my journey with you in the hope you will benefit from my experiences. 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. 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 memoir using a mouth stick.

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## 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 in a hospital. I couldn't move, but I didn't know why. I felt compelled to inquire about what occurred. 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.

I was numb.; 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 circular 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 later what the term meant if it was really all that important.

They put a metal, canvas-covered frame on 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 in order to keep my neck stabilized.

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 an opening in the canvas, so I could 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 me, 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, nurses' aides would return to my room, sandwich me between the two frames, and rotate me again. Two hours face up, two hours face down.

This went on all day, all week, for an entire month.

While I was face down in this contraption, some of my friends came to visit. Lauri, a dear friend from school, would lie 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. I wasn't properly secured and one of the metal tongs came out of the hole in my head as I was turned. They had to re-drill the hole immediately, but they had to drill it deeper to keep the tong from coming out again. *Surely they'll take a moment to administer a local anesthetic, at least?* But no, they did this all while I was awake, without anesthetic.

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 were dangerous to operate and could cause damage to my skull and brain. 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 learn what their reactions were 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.) Either way, my sisters, even at the tender ages of 11 and 14, 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 Metropolitan General Hospital 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.

It should be noted that, having suffered severe head trauma at the time of my accident, as well as partial retrograde amnesia, a lot of the information pertaining to my life prior to my injury, in this book, has been

provided by my siblings and friends. My parents, God rest their souls, were unable to contribute.

My youngest sister, Pam, was indeed traumatized when she saw the metal tongs in my head. Mindy, three 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 struggles to this day with understanding 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 of these soldiers spent a lot of time in the hallways of the hospital. That was difficult for my younger siblings to see, never having experienced anything like this.

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. She was traumatized 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.

Having survived the first month, my friends and classmates 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.

My friends 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 following that fundraiser. 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 Metro, I learned I had fractured my neck at the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> cervical levels and severed my spinal cord completely. Hence, the paralysis. I had also cracked my skull and broken my shoulder. I was completely paralyzed as the spinal cord

was in shock. It would take months before I learned how much movement I would get back.

The top 8 vertebra are cervical. My spinal cord was severed at C-4, which meant that I was totally paralyzed, from the nipple line down, with zero sensation on the left 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 on 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 all of it.

It was a terribly odd feeling. I can't remember those two weeks, but I was treated by hospital staff as if I was completely aware of my situation. 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, while I was still learning about my physical abilities and lack thereof, 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 remained crucial to most of the guys who were 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 because he had never gone to the hospital when one of us had an accident. Dad told her I had an accident and had been taken to Parma Hospital. My mother ran to the van and they were on their way.



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.

My sister, Pam, told me that Dr. White (a prominent neurosurgeon), literally bumped into my mom and 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 conferred with the emergency room physician 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.

It's incomprehensible because, just prior to my injury, I had been with my friends celebrating the end of our junior year in high school. A group of my friends decided to have a picnic to celebrate finishing our junior year. Most of us were Thespians involved in our school theater. Some of us were actors and some worked on the stage or with props. We consoled each other when someone didn't get the parts they'd 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.

On that fateful day, 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 drove their 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 43' 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 and severing my spinal cord, I had cracked my skull and broken my right shoulder. No one in my group saw me go over the cliff edge.

Fortunately, there was a climber at the base of the cliff who saw me fall. He was able to stabilize me until help came.

From what I understand, getting EMS (Emergency Medical Services) was a difficult task. Back in 1972, there were no cellphones or GPS. Somehow, the climber found one of my friends and alerted 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 still had difficulty finding me.

I drifted in and out of consciousness but when anyone asked me a question, I could answer. 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 undergo immediate surgery.

I was operated on by Dr. Robert White, one of the most prominent neurosurgeons in the state of Ohio. He performed a laminectomy and anterior fusion, which required taking a piece of my hip bone to fuse my

vertebrae together in order to prevent further damage to my spinal cord.

Sometime during my first two weeks at Cleveland Metro, I was told I would be totally paralyzed the rest of my life. 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.

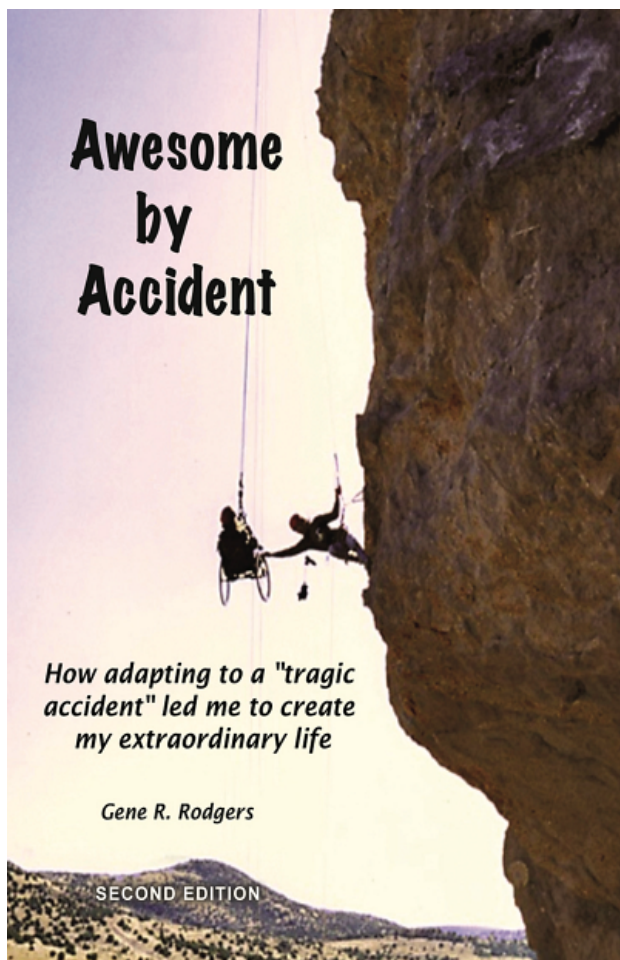
Before realizing I would be totally paralyzed for life, I did realize that I had an injury that would take time to heal. I wondered how it would affect the pursuit of my passions in life. Eager to find out how limited my life would be, I asked the doctor if my injury would limit my ability to play football or lift weights. He said "Yes", turned around, and left the room. **He knew I'd be totally paralyzed! Why didn't he take the time to explain further or 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. I was 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 I explored it further 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. To this day, there is speculation among family members and friends about how all this came about.

Years after that fateful day, my mother recounted that she thought 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 held my father responsible for my accident.

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. I can not harbor hate or blame towards anyone. Such action would harm me.



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