

REBUILDING LIVES

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Get Busy Living

After making it through the dark days, J.R. Litehiser now makes light of his amputation.

On May 23, 2008, while finishing a concrete floor in the basement of a Portland, Ore. house, contractor J.R. Litehiser's life as he knew it suddenly went up in flames. Litehiser was working with a solvent-based sealer when a spark in the basement ignited just the right mixture of oxygen and fuel, causing the house to burst like a bomb, according to



Once he found a device that worked for him, Litehiser was able to return to carpentry and concrete work.

Image: Advanced Arm Dynamics

Litehiser. Recollecting his emergency training in the midst of the burning basement, Litehiser remained calm and stopped, dropped and rolled.

Engulfed in flames, he got out of the basement, screamed for help, rolled on the ground and passed out. He suffered burns on 84% of his body. Of that 84%, 70% were considered third-degree burns. He would not wake up for 8 weeks.

Turmoil

Litehiser was in a medically induced coma at Emanuel Hospital in north Portland during which time doctors performed numerous life-saving surgeries. His body was systematically shutting down. He was on a ventilator and dialysis. He was badly burned from the right side of his face down to his right leg and from his torso down to both his feet. His quick thinking and training ultimately saved his life.

When Litehiser woke from his coma in the burn center at Emanuel Hospital, he immediately knew he had lost his right hand. Also, all of the muscles from the lower half of his left leg were dead and essentially skin and bones.

“I was pretty ticked off for a long time,” Litehiser admitted to *O&P Business News*. “I felt like I was robbed. I was cut down in the prime of my earning years. I was disabled by a fire and I had no idea how I was going to rebuild my life.”

“It was just a mess”

After returning home from the Emanuel Hospital Oregon Burn Center, Litehiser’s spouse at the time revealed she wanted a divorce.

“To deal with that on top of everything else, it was just a mess,” he said. “It just was not a happy time for me.”

Litehiser was given a body-powered prosthesis following his return home. It was uncomfortable and never fit correctly. The skin on his residual limb was irritated. The harness wrapped around his shoulder and down along his chest and torso, running across areas that were badly burned and recently treated with skin grafts. The pain was unbearable and trying to get a hold of a prosthetist was just as frustrating for Litehiser. The company he was working with only made an upper extremity prosthetist available once every quarter.

“It was really painful and so I went a solid year and half without using a prosthesis,” Litehiser said. “My son and I named my residual limb, Knubby. It was a cartoon character more than anything else.”

A Thursday morning

For Litehiser, something had to give.

“I felt like I had been through the ringer, both physically and emotionally and it was just time to start making a change,” he said. “I was at rock bottom and living like that just was not going to do it for me anymore. It is like the famous line from *The Shawshank Redemption*: “Get busy living or get busy dying.”

Litehiser can still recall the day he decided he was going to make a change in his life. It was a Thursday morning in central Oregon. He happened to be put in touch with a support group called the Central Oregon Resources for Independent Living, although he never intended on going to the meetings. The group helped people living with cognitive

and physical disabilities reclaim as much of their independence as they could. He had never been to a support group before.

Litehiser walked into the meeting room that Thursday morning and talked with individuals who would completely change his outlook on life.

“There were maybe eight of us or so,” Litehiser recalled. “I was at that point where I was just sick and tired of being sick and tired. I met some amazing people at this meeting. I don’t think to this day they understand the profound effect they had on me.”

Litehiser met a man who was paralyzed from the neck down from a motorcycle accident. He also met a rocket scientist who lost a large amount of his cognitive abilities due to a stroke. He saw them cope with their disabilities and how they still managed to maintain a functional life.

“To see these guys champion through a day made me feel less sorry for myself and made me think, what can I do to get the most out of this second chance in life?” Litehiser explained.

Chance meeting

Soon after his support group meeting, Litehiser had surgery on his left hand and began working with an occupational therapist who had worked with Advanced Arm Dynamics before moving to central Oregon. The occupational therapist invited Litehiser to a talk that she and MacJulian Lang, CP, clinical director, Advanced Arm Dynamics, were going to be giving at a local hospital for physical and occupational therapists.

“The previous company he had worked with approached the insurance company about a myoelectric but was given a denial,” Lang explained to *O&P Business News*. “They told him your insurance company is not going to pay for it. That was it. But we are not that easily dissuaded.”

After meeting with Litehiser, Lang immediately invited him to Portland for an evaluation.

“He made it clear to me right away that upper extremity prostheses was what they do all the time and it was inside of 2 weeks of that initial meeting, I was in Portland getting a cast made for an elbow-suspended suction-fitted terminal device. I was hungry for something to use and when I saw the functionalities that could be gained by having it as a tool, I dove right in,” Liteheiser said.

Most prosthetists advise their patients not to wear their prosthesis for more than an hour or 2 in the first few days in order to get used to functioning during activities. Litehiser was wearing his 8 or 9 hours a day immediately following his first fitting.

“They told me not to drive with it and that was the first thing I did,” he said. “I used it to steer so I could hold a cup of coffee in my other hand. I went full tilt.”

Lang agreed. Litehiser always goes “full tilt.”

“J.R. is fun to work with, the quintessential bull in the china shop,” he joked. “The only complication that we had is that he takes whatever you give him and uses it immediately and actively which occasionally leads to broken devices. We realized quickly that telling him to be gentle with something does not really get us the results we need. But he is so focused on making it a part of his daily use that training has not been a struggle.”

An icebreaker

Litehiser could see that the prosthesis would benefit him on a daily basis and instantly became an avid prosthesis user. He can hold doors open, drive, change radio stations and has even started doing carpentry and concrete work again.

“It’s fun cooking with it and I can grab hot stuff out of the oven and it freaks everyone out,” he joked. “I can make it rotate like *The Exorcist*, 360°. When children ask what happened I tell them never run with scissors. It is a lot of fun. It’s a great icebreaker, a neat tool.”

It is easy to develop a comfortable working relationship with Litehiser thanks to his natural outgoing personality, Lang said. In fact, he occasionally brings his son and dogs to the office during his fittings.

“You have to laugh about it, it is definitely a defense mechanism and it underscores some of the disappointment or the hurt, but it is also helpful to remember not to take certain things too seriously,” he explained. “I mean, there are so many worse scenarios that could have easily occurred. I could have lost both my arms and legs. I could have died. I could not be here.”

Service work

Before Litehiser was a contractor he was in law enforcement. Before he was in law enforcement, he was a teacher. He has naturally leaned towards professions that help people. Now, he is a volunteer, speaking on behalf of the United Way asking for donations through payroll deductions. He also works with On the Move, a program

funded by the state of Oregon that transitions individuals with disabilities out of the hospital and into independent living at home.

“I get to meet all kinds of folks doing that type of work,” cLitehiser said.

According to Lang, Litehiser has been a positive influence on other amputees.

“We do not often use the term ‘poster boy’ around here but he is that type of person,” Lang said. “This is a man who lost pretty much everything along with his arm and at this point his limiting factor is no longer his amputation or prosthesis. That’s beneficial for people to hear and helpful for amputees to see.

Along with his volunteer work with the United Way, he has been to a support group that Advanced Arm Dynamics created in Portland that is upper limb amputee specific. He has spoken there and has helped some of the individuals in the group, according to Lang.

His message

Now with a growing family, Litehiser is at peace with his life. A jokester, he still admitted that he has his good days and bad ones as well.

“I would just say make the most of the time you have. But trust me; I understand the seriousness of a traumatic loss or not having a limb. For me it sucked. If I could have my hand back I would, but I can’t so I’m just going to get on with it,” he said.

Litehiser reconnected with his high school sweetheart, Jillian.

“We just so happened to live not too far from one another and we are now living together and we have combined families, plus a new baby. So that is what I am most excited about. I love it. I have always wanted a large family.” — *by Anthony Calabro*