

If you quit, you'll be sitting forever

Sept. 14, 1999

Of the moment he was transformed, Clinton Carriere remembers nothing.

All that remains is this: a summer's day at the Cumberland House village fair. The ferris wheel, turning high above his head. A line of people, waiting to get on. A man beside him, stooping down to pick up a slip of paper.

Three men stood in a line beneath the ferris wheel, that June day in 1977, when a bucket seat fell from the wheel, down, down, down...

One man died. Another man — saved by a fallen slip of paper — walked away unharmed. The third, Carriere, was knocked to the earth, two of his vertebrae crushed beyond repair.

"I turned around, the next thing I knew I was in the hospital. I was lost," Carriere says.

"When I first woke up, all I could move was my head," Carriere says. "Eventually I started moving my arms, and then (I realized) from here" — he

A moment's tragedy gave Clinton Carriere the challenge of his life

gestures to the middle of his chest — "down I didn't have any feelings."

For 28 days, the 21-year-old lay in his hospital bed. His legs puffed up with fluid, and a nurse came with a long needle to drain them, and Carriere slipped back into what he describes as "shock".

Every morning, a nurse would come into Carriere's room and gently push the young man's feet down. At the end of her shift, she would repeat the exercise. One day, Carriere moved a foot on his own.

"She ran out of the room and got the other nurses," Carriere recalls. "They wanted to see (the movement), but I couldn't do it, I was so weak."

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Carriere gives praise to Gary Tinker Fed.

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Nevertheless, shortly after that, he was moved from his hospital bed into a wheelchair. One day, he received a visit from a doctor.

"He told me, 'you've got two choices,'" Carriere says. "'Number one: if you don't quit you'll get somewhere. But if you quit, that (wheelchair) is where you're going to be sitting for the rest of your life.'

"I only had two choices," Carriere adds, "and I must have made the right one, because it only took me nine months to get off my ass and start walking."

In many ways, he was one of the lucky ones: back in Cumberland House, he found the support he needed, from family and friends, to literally get back on his feet. Even so, he quickly realized that many of the services disabled people needed — from physiotherapy to employment opportunities — were not available in most northern communities.

"There was nothing here for us," Carriere says. "Disabled people were staying home. They weren't coming out in the open, because no one was helping them."

It wasn't until 1989, 12 years after his accident, that Carriere heard about an effort to change things for the better. That was the year Gary Tinker, a 22-year-old man with cerebral palsy, decided to walk from La Ronge to Regina to raise awareness of the issues faced by northerners with disabilities. Tinker also hoped to raise enough money to start a northern-based centre that would provide northerners with access to training and support services.

Impressed by what he'd heard, Carriere came to La Ronge on Aug. 1, 1989 to wish Tinker well. Never having met Tinker before, Carriere was eagerly awaiting his arrival — but when he finally spotted the man himself, his heart sank.

"I thought he was a big guy, and when he came around the corner, he was just a small guy, and I thought he wouldn't get anywhere," Carriere remembers.

However, Tinker did eventually get to Regina, which led to the formation of the Gary Tinker Federation (GTF) in Nov. 1989.

This past week, Sept. 9-11, GTF celebrated its 10th anniversary with a conference. Carriere was there, now as a member of the GTF board and as living proof that Tinker's walk has changed the lives of northern disabled people.

"If it wasn't for the Gary Tinker Federation, I wouldn't have a job," he says in a calm, straightforward manner. Through the GTF and its subsidized employment program, Carriere has become a school bus driver in Cumberland House. He started the job in 1998.

The GTF also enabled Carriere to take Class 1A driver training in Saskatoon, and to become a certified front-end loader operator. His long-term goal is to work as a driver at one of the mines.

"The one thing I was taught was not to quit, that things that I believe in can come true," Carriere says. "At one time, it was just a dream for me to walk again."

Fulfilling dreams is what the GTF is all about, but a lot of northern disabled people haven't come to terms with that yet, Carriere says. "They don't want to come out in the open, they're scared," he says. Through the GTF, that help is available. They just need to trust, says Carriere.