

## Important:

If you want more information, want to suggest things you have learned over the years or just want to be part of a like-minded community, please consider my online community at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1690495544472414>

I always enjoy getting feedback about this book so please consider leaving a review on Amazon when you have completed the book, or you can visit my site at

<http://www.gifdzn.net/books/>

Finally, a portion of the profits of this book go to the [Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation](#), so please share this with someone you think might need it.

Enjoy,

Jesse



## **Chapter 1: Who I Am**

I am so glad you have chosen to read my book. I have overcome and learned a lot from my challenges over the years. I hope to accomplish three goals with this book. My first goal is to provide a road map for those newly injured or currently injured people who have a spinal cord injury (SCI) or other form of ailment that may cause paralysis. Second, I want to provide a resource for families, spouses, or caregivers, to better understand the needs of someone living with paralysis. Finally, I hope to give you answers to questions you may not know to ask or are maybe even a little embarrassed to ask.

My name is Jesse Gifford. I had an incomplete C5-6 spinal cord injury in 1997 when I was eighteen. After my injury, I was scared, lost, and had no idea what I would be able to do in the present and on into my future. I had to learn things the hard way. I did not always have resources or experienced people to show me the way. Doctors, nurses, therapists, and even caregivers do not always volunteer information, and in some cases, they just are not aware of essential

information to give to someone living with paralysis. Even though I have lived with an SCI for many years, there are still things that come up that make me say to myself, *man, I wish I would have known about this earlier after my injury*. With that in mind, I want to provide you with the essential things I have learned over the years. I hope they will help you have an easier experience.

As I began to write this book, it was around the time of my twenty-third anniversary since my accident. My wife, Analisa, asked me if I ever think about that day, I had my injury. Of all days, it was Mother's Day 1997. I was eighteen. Me, my mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, and my aunt's son's girlfriend all got together for Mother's Day. We decided to go up into the woods near our favorite campground. This campground and general area were a favorite place that my entire family had gone to for as long as I could remember. We pretty much grew up running through these woods and swimming in the many creeks that flowed through the area. We had our favorite swimming holes that we would always go to, to swim. Today was no different. It was an unusually warm spring day. I loved the water, so naturally, I thought I needed to go swimming. The rest of my family was already down near our favorite swimming hole.

I quickly changed into my shorts at my truck and took off running through the woods. As I got close to the water, I was running at full stride. I pulled off my shirt, gave a yell of excitement, planted my foot at the edge of the water, and dove in. Everything went dark and became still. I was totally conscious but unable to move anything but my head and shoulders. I could not feel the frigid water

surrounding me. I thought to myself, *my family is up the creek a ways and surely must have heard me yell. I just have to hold my breath long enough for them to get to me.* For about a minute, I held my breath as sensations and consciousness slowly faded away.

I began to see a light but was unsure of what was happening to me. I opened my eyes slightly to a flood of light. I then tried taking a shallow breath to see if there was air or water. Thankfully, it was air. I quickly exhaled and then inhaled as much fresh mountain air as possible. They had gotten to me and were able to turn me over but could not completely pull me out of the cold water. I lay partially submerged and unable to move for about an hour until help arrived. I was air-lifted to the nearest hospital, about twenty to thirty minutes away by air. My surgery took around five hours. They had to make a five-inch incision in the front of my neck, paralleling my esophagus, so they could gain access to my injured spinal cord. They created a fused bridge over the fractured area of my spinal cord.

My injury was an incomplete break, meaning my spinal cord was not completely severed. The break was located just about level to the top of my shoulders at the C5-6 level of my spinal cord. The first two weeks after my injury were spent in ICU. During that time, I fought to get off a ventilator. Shortly after the ventilator was removed, I developed pneumonia due to the ventilator or the frigid water or a combination of the two.

I spent another two and a half months in the hospital recovering and going through physical therapy. I was released just after my nineteenth birthday in August and went home to my amazing father,

mother, and sister. Over the next year, I strived to get stronger and eventually could use about 50 percent of both arms. I could move my wrist up and down but had no finger movement at all. Everything else below mid-chest was paralyzed.

I accomplished my goal of getting strong enough to start college just about a year after my accident. Two years later, I began driving again on my own. Long story short, I graduated from college in 2004 with a computer science degree. I found a job a year later as a web and graphic designer for a publishing company. I worked until I got a pressure sore in 2010. That took me a year to recover. Unsure how my health would be, I had to go on Social Security disability and eventually went back to work part time at an elementary school. I bought a house in 2013 and married Analisa in 2015. We have enjoyed a happy, healthy life ever since.

After all these years, I do not really think about my accident much anymore. The one thing that has always haunted me about my accident is *why and how did this happen to me?* I was an athlete who was co-captain of both the football and track teams in high school. I had been a lifeguard for several years at the YMCA. I knew where I was diving and that it was deep enough to dive into. The most bizarre thing is that I never hit anything in the water. I did not even hit the bottom. An SCI can happen to anyone at any time. It does not matter who you are, what kind of shape you are in, or how much money you are worth. I often thought about the how and why, but it never gave me answers or helped me in any way. I have always tried to look

forward and focus on the things that need to be done and accomplish goals that I have set for myself, rather than dwell on what could have been. I chalk it up to, *it must have just happened for a reason*. Maybe the reason is just to write this book to help you!

Parts of this book may be hard to read for someone new to SCI or paralysis. The positive thing you must keep in mind is that you are learning this information now. You are not always told the things you need to know. Being able to find the resources and knowing what is possible as early as you can will save you in numerous ways. I will also discuss important things you need to know about staying healthy. Looking back from my perspective now, a book like this would have been a positive game changer for me. So, through all my health issues, assistance issues, and personal issues that I have gone through, you will receive the benefit. You're welcome!