



Gary

We start with you saying your full name, and then a little bit about your family, your history, were you born in Pittsburgh, whatever you feel comfortable talking about.

All right. My name is Gary Lee Richter and I'm fifty-six years old. I was born in Crafton, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh. I became disabled when twenty years ago, in 1988, a speeding automobile rammed into the back of my motorcycle on the Interstate highway, and whiplashed me at the waist and did a head-over-heels, threw me over the handlebars of the motorcycle and then I did a backflop into the cement, at about seventy-five miles and hour.

So that was twenty years ago and ever since then I've been struggling to heal a back that basically was broken at that time, and thank God it wasn't broken all the way, completely, but I have had a lot of struggle trying to achieve what was originally my goal of overcoming the injuries completely and returning to normal. But after twenty years it appears that maybe that's not possible.

The doctors told me that it was an impossible goal at the time and I couldn't believe it. The pain was too off the scale. They told me, they said, "You have to learn to live with pain." I couldn't admit that to myself that I would have to do that because the pain was too great to admit to myself that I would be in that kind of pain for the rest of my life would be to, that would be a ticket to suicide or drug oblivion. I'd have to just be completely drugged too much and life would be over as far as I was concerned.

So I had to fight to rehabilitate myself and no surgeon or anything offered me any real hope that they were going to do anything with surgical methods. They really weren't even clear on what was wrong. And it has taken me decades to even understand what's wrong in there. So I finally did come to understand that in my low back where the spine meets the pelvis, cartilage that holds those various bones together was snapped like a chef snaps a chicken bone, you know, preparing it to cook. So as a result, the muscles in that area go into spasm trying to hold things stable and then they went into spasm and stayed there for years. It was like a charley-horse, like a spasm but not just in my calf or something, in my whole body. And it actually stayed there for years before it even started to release.

So for awhile I was able to keep going on adrenaline. When they gave me a wheelchair at the hospital, I refused to sit in it. And instead, what I did was I supported my weight on my hands. I'd find tables and doorknobs and various things to hold myself up with, and just kept on walking. Never got in a wheelchair and never used crutches. But I couldn't support the weight of my body, so I had to find things to hold me up. And so I kept moving that way, and within four hours of being injured, I was back up again moving.

Then a year later, I read, I thought it was in Reader's Digest. I read somewhere in some book that right about the time when that happened the doctors at Allegheny General Hospital made this big discovery that if you get somebody with spinal injuries up and moving within eight hours of their spinal injuries, suddenly the prospects for their recovery go way up. So somehow they discovered that right about the time I was there.

But I ended up trying to keep going when I really wasn't able to keep going, so for years I ended up, the first couple of years were pretty bad. After I stopped going on adrenaline, and I was ignoring the pain, despite the fact that it was off the scale, and depleted my entire adrenal system. And kept pushing myself despite that, despite the pain and despite the great exhaustion and constantly looking for caffeine, you know, ways to stimulate myself to stay awake, trying to return to normal, until I found myself walking out in front of traffic in a daze because I was pushing myself too much. And then one time when a car almost hit me, I had no reflexes, but I realized that that car might have hit me and killed me, but that didn't scare me because the life I was living was not worth living anyway. So it's like "What's the difference?"

Then a thought entered my mind that changed my approach, which was the car might have hit me and instead of killing me, might have pushed me further back in my rehabilitation, and that was a real scary thought.

So I stopped trying to push myself so much and I realized I'm not going to get where I need to go just by pushing myself continuously. I have to learn some other way. So I had to learn how to not let the fact that I wasn't keeping up with my responsibilities bother me. I had to learn how to not care. I had to almost learn how to be irresponsible. My house, the gutters don't get cleaned out for a long enough time, and the water sits in the gutters for too long and steel gutters rust and then it starts to leak and the water comes in the house and the plaster falls off, and I'm laying in bed and it's like "Oh, well, you know? Can't worry about that. I can't let that bother me."

I had to learn that there's a difference between stress and stressors. The difference being that the stressors are the external events that cause the stress and the is actually an internal thing, an internal reaction to the external events, and you can have a disconnect there, and I had to learn how to disconnect the external events from my own internal reaction, which was completely counter to everything I ever knew before.

So I learned that and years passed. At first I was really in bed for twenty-three hours a day out of every twenty-four, sometimes I would have to crawl to the bathroom and stuff like that, and that would be my time out of bed for the day.

But I kept getting up as much as I could and I kept telling myself that I only needed to try a little harder and a little bit more time and a little more rest would do it. And years passed and then, I was basically still in a daze, and I mostly still avoided drugs. I actually was without drugs for quite awhile. Then I hooked up with a new health care provider that was actually based on, actually run by a chiropractor with a comprehensive approach that included medical doctors and all kinds of other techniques.

End of Track 1

It turned out that this worked very well for me because the chiropractors are concerned with mechanical things, and medical doctors are concerned with medicine, drugs that you put into your system. Well, I knew that my problem was mechanical. I knew that all along, and so this chiropractic place knew about not only the alignment of the spine but how the various parts worked together and how when you're not able to use your body correctly for years, then the muscles atrophy. Even when the muscles are in spasm constantly, they atrophy. That's the problem. They say, "No pain, no gain." That's what the bodybuilders say. But if your muscles are constantly spasmed, they still wither away. The pain is way beyond what the muscle builders call pain, but you don't get any gain at all. As a matter of fact, the gain is negative. It's a negative thing.

So I had to learn that, and then the chiropractors would straighten out my spine as best they could, and then they put me on exercise machines. They put me on an exercise regimen and it was pretty painful to exercise with the spasmed muscles, but I kept it up as best I could, and over many years I would do as much as I could on the program until I would finally collapse. And then I'd go back home and I'd end up in bed for a couple weeks and but after that couple weeks, I'd have less pain than I did, less pain than I did before I started with the program, the exercise program, and also less pain than I did during the exercise program, and I'd say, "Oh, okay. Now I'm better."

So I'd get up and I'd try to start doing normal things and living a normal life, and then gradually the pain would come back, and within a short time after that I would be overwhelmed with pain again, and even though I had dropped out of the program, I'd call them back and "Help!"

So they'd say, "Okay, come on back."

So they'd put me on a program and start me over from the beginning. I did this over and over again for many years until finally the results started accumulating. So that's actually still what I do, although I have finished those exercise programs now, once or twice. I've actually completed the program, but still what happens is when I don't have the exercise program for a long enough period of time, the pain will build back up and I still need the artificial manipulation to straighten out my spine and plus I've had hundreds of spinal injections. They use needles to inject solutions into areas of my spine. I've actually had two doctors at once, giving my spinal injections. They gave me so many, they couldn't even charge the insurance company for them. They just kept giving me spinal injections and the doctors, I almost felt like it was unbelievable what I was telling them. I'd come in and they'd poke me and say, "Does it hurt here?"

I'd say, "Yeah."

They'd poke me in another place – "Does it hurt here?"

"Yeah."

Every place they poked it hurt, and then they said, “Oh, it’s a dull ache?”

And I said, “No, it’s not a dull ache. It’s like raging pain and it’s so many different places, I can’t even tell where it’s coming from. So they injected those needles in there and they were working with the chiropractors, those medical doctors with the needles, plus the physical therapists and then various soothing therapies like massage and all that. Add it all up and each one gives a little bit of relief, and you add enough of that and finally you get some major relief.

That’s what I’ve been doing and that’s what I’ve been doing for twenty years. Now I’m able to exercise on my own. I’ve discovered that, uh, my progress on that exercise program sort of plateaued, and I wasn’t really functional yet. That’s when I found a swimming pool and I knew that swimming would help. I got in the swimming pool and at first I wasn’t able to get there very often, maybe two or three times a month, but eventually, it increased to where now I swim four times a week, and the swimming plus the exercise program and the occasional chiropractic manipulation, and occasional spinal injections once in awhile, keeps me at a place where I think that if people would look at me, they would say, “Well you know, you don’t have any problems at all.”

I still get tired a lot and still have pain every day. The pain often still drives me to bed, but it’s nowhere near as bad as it was. I’ve made progress.

And so now I have started looking for ways to become employed again. I’ve called various people, various organizations –I’ve seen signs and posters that they are there to help disabled people to become gainfully employed again, and so through that process I ended up finding Working Order here at the Volunteers of America, and so now what we’re working on is a business plan for an idea for a business that I’ve had for a long time. As a matter of fact, before I even hurt. Before I became injured, I was working on these business ideas. So now, what we’re doing is trying to put all that together into a coherent form that will succeed, and you know that’s reasonable and feasible.

And what is the business?

It’s a cabinetmaking idea. It’s making special kinds of cabinets for speakers, speaker cabinet-making, but special kind of speaker cabinets. It’s new ideas. There’s three different innovations in the cabinets that I’ve never seen anywhere before. So I’m now working on developing the business idea, the business plan for the cabinets itself. But I need specialized equipment to make these things. Also, because of my own physical limitations, I need to make sure that -- for instance, like materials handling -- I need special ways to handle materials, whereas I could pick up a sheet of plywood and move it. The problem is, if I tried to do something like that all day long, there’s not going to be another day the next day, and there’s not going to be another day for weeks. I might be able to force myself to do it, but I’ll pay too heavy a price.

But the beauty of that is that, you know, the flip side of the coin or the silver lining or whatever, is that by forcing me to think of these easy ways to do things, if the point comes where I get to hire employees, if I can sell enough of these things and I get to hire employees, well those systems that are in place will make it easier for anybody else that comes in to handle the materials and do what needs to be done. So anybody can do it. So that's like sort of the silver lining to the cloud.

End of Track 2

What were you doing before your accident?

At the time of my accident I was a touring musician. I was on tour with the Dell Vikings, actually, the musical band. Well, they're on the geezer programs on WQED.

What instrument did you play?

Keyboards. As a matter of fact, if I would have been a little smarter, I could have -- I couldn't continue traveling, that's what it was, after I got hurt I couldn't continue traveling. I did actually continue with the band, I continued playing with the band, but when it came time to travel, I had to say "No." I couldn't do it, you know.

Ever since then, I've lowered my sights a little bit and tried to get jobs that would keep me moving a little bit, but not be physically demanding, so I could stay on my feet. The doctors all have, from the beginning, encouraged me to exercise. They encouraged me to exercise and encouraged me to walk. But the thing is, at first I'd get a job that would -- Each job I would get, I'd lower my sights a little bit, as to what I could do, and then I'd be sort of crushed when I couldn't do that. And lower my sights some more, and finally just ended up laying in bed in pain, before the process of recovery that I've outlined.

Did you fight off depression during all this?

Oh, yeah, as a matter of fact, at one point they prescribed depression medication. Actually I realized that depression is a physical thing, because what happened was, at the time my adrenal system became drained, my brain was real cloudy. It was not only that I was exhausted, and that makes your brain cloudy, but it was also that because my glandular system was depleted because I had been trying to push myself too much, really. You can only run on adrenaline for so long and then it shuts down. Basically, it shut down. The adrenaline is related to the glandular system, the neur-epinephrine and the neur-adrenaline and all these things that connect in your brain, the synapsis. So anyway, that all shut down and I found out that when I took various of these anti-depression medicines, they would perk up my brain, so I could think. It would take away the fuzziness, some.

That was around the time that I learned, or maybe slightly before the time that I learned, not to push myself so much that I ended up in dangerous situations. So I started resting more after that. Actually, I'm discussing physical depression, which is a depression of

the amount of these chemicals that your body is producing. Those reuptake inhibitors help to recycle what limited amount of those chemicals I had, but with the increased rest and those things, I gradually went the other way, to where my body was producing these things again, and in the end –

First of all, I was reluctant to take these pills, but when I did take them, it became obvious that they were good, cause I could think better and then the effectiveness of these pills started to diminish, but I think the only reason they started to diminish was my own natural ability to produce these chemicals was increasing as I got more rest. So in the end the pills really didn't do much, and I was able to stop taking the pills. But that's like a physical depression, but there's also another component, an emotional component to depression, that's yes, it's very depressing to find yourself in these conditions. Yes, it is very depressing. I sort of separate those two. I think most people, when they talk about depression, they talk about the emotional side, and I don't know how these pills would, I don't see how they actually would do anything, at least not for me, because I'm aware of the causes and I want to address the causes. And when the cause was a reduction in my body's ability to produce the necessary chemicals, okay, that's one thing. But when it's an external cause, something else keeping me down, I can take pills forever. I can take muscle relaxers and they will put me to sleep and it doesn't bother me cause I'm not awake. But I don't want to drug myself into oblivion. That's the problem.

What things did you try to avoid, in terms of being in constant pain?

Well, I told myself I was. What I did, I told myself that it's less than it was yesterday, and my goal of complete healing was right around the corner -- for twenty years.

That's pretty strong.

My problem was that I had a too high threshold of pain. My threshold of pain and my tolerance of pain was way too high for my own good. That's why I ended up not even admitting the pain until such a time as my exhaustion was so bad that I was walking around in a daze, doing things like walking out in front of traffic. On my way to the donut shop to get a cup of coffee, to stimulate myself, literally, walking out in traffic, trying to find stimulation.

Like I said, that's when I realized that sometimes trying harder is not the answer, which I had never experienced before. Trying harder was always the answer.

What about the financial end of this? Did your health insurance cover all this?

Oh, no. That made it worse, because at first, and also what might have made it worse was that I wouldn't admit that I was disabled. And my finances are still a mess. What happened was, in addition to being a traveling musician at the time that I had actually become injured, prior to that I was a carpenter and a contractor and had worked building new homes and things like that. So I had some of that equipment. So what I did was I realized that I would not be picking up these hundred pound jackpoles and ladders and

stuff anymore, and scaffolds and all that stuff, so I sold all that stuff and got a little bit of money to live on while I was waiting for my complete recovery to happen.

I was paying for everything cash out of pocket, what I could, and basically I had no income and I didn't have any insurance. It took me three years to even use the word disabled concerning myself. I wouldn't even think it. Then finally, actually what made the difference for me was that I got a bill in the mail from the gas company that said something about you can apply for disability benefits. I was eligible all along, but I never applied. So I applied and because I had taken three years to apply,

End of Track 3

they said, "Oh, you've been disabled for three years. What have you been doing?" So that added extra complications and it took another three years or so to actually be seen as disabled and start receiving benefits, which was fine. Now I had an income to live on, and also Medicare, which would start paying doctors.

There's some doctor bills out there, various medical providers and chiropractors that, I don't know what I owe them or did owe them, I'm sure they wrote it off a long time ago. I'm sure I can't even remember all the treatments I got, let alone pay them all. But that was pretty bad. When I knew I needed treatment, I couldn't even afford to buy the medicines that the doctors would prescribe. And like I said, I sold off what I could.

Then what I did was I hooked up with OVR and they said, "Well, we'll send you back to college. You can finish your college degree and that will get you vocationally rehabilitated.

I said, "Okay," but really what I was doing was I was just getting the loans, the school loans, so I would have something to live on. And, of course, now those loans are long-past-due and unpaid. Now there's interest and penalties and nasty collectors attached to that.

And so that's basically -- it feels like as I overcome these great obstacles of physical disability and gradually return to the point where I becoming able again, I am now in a situation that has a tendency to keep me disabled. I imagine there must be other people that have said things like that. And that is a depressing thought, but more than depressing, infuriating. You struggle this hard to overcome the real problem that has to be there no matter what. And then, okay, well, some of it's my own, I won't say stupidity, but a lack of knowledge and lack of ability to find other channels and ways to get through it. I knew I would pay the price some day, but you gotta do what you gotta do today.

Now I come here to Working Order and I speak with my advisor, and it's coming to light that these sorts of financial problems are having an effect on my ability to proceed forward now, which could actually impact the business plan or maybe even cripple the whole thing before it even gets started. So now I've just begun to work on resolving

those matters, which hopefully I'll be able to. But I believe that I've recovered physically to the point to where, if my circumstances were normal, my financial circumstances and my living circumstances, if that were normal, I believe that I could deal with it. I believe I could deal normally enough with a normal situation, but the problem is that after twenty years of disability, the situation is not normal. And then there's another thing, which further complicates matters. Which is really even a bigger problem, apparently. Which comes down to, I don't know if anybody has said anything like this, and maybe you don't want to hear anything like this, since you're from the county. But there has to be... My situation has become much more difficult because I live under circumstances where basically gangs of criminals have found me, and these gangs of criminals are not restrained by the law because the law's in the hands of people that don't want to restrain the criminals. So I've been living under conditions of extreme stress.

I've been victimized by criminals that have forged my name to official documents and, well put it this way -- organized criminals, crooked judges and crooked cops all together, and I just -- Apparently they're running a system that is not constitutional. Apparently they're running a system that consists of a combination criminal protection racket and human sacrifice industry, and I have been chosen as a sacrifice, which is like, to me -- I think it sounds bizarre, but that's what I've found. And that complicates rehabilitation quite a bit, let me tell you.

I don't know what you can say to that, but that's just a snapshot. You wouldn't believe how much of my time that has wasted.

Has it just been identity theft or –

No. Forgery of my signature to a real estate deed and a crooked judge pretending to be an idiot, not to recognize an obvious forgery.

Was it a family member?

Well, that one was, but now it happens to be that gangs of criminals where I live in McKees Rocks found out about this and they're inspired. Now they're trying to steal the house that I'm living in. You wouldn't believe what they're doing. It's unbelievable. You would say, "Well, how can anybody steal your house?"

Well, they're inspired because somebody else has already done it with another house. They forged my name to a real estate deed.

There's complications, of course, and those complications give a crooked judge an ability to pretend to be too stupid to know what's going on. But what it boils down to is this crooked judge is backing up criminals, and criminals, I'm telling you what, have turned in false reports on me. Cops have literally busted down the door to my house while I was laying in bed with a broken back, at the request of criminals that claim to pay them off.

Now, were the cops paid off by these criminals? I don't know. Were they acting like they were paid off? Yes.

So, to have criminals running wild on your own property, it's one thing. And then when you try to stand up against it, to have the authorities back up the criminals, rather than doing anything about it, and the authorities are always pretending to be too stupid to know what's going on, and then they invite the criminals to turn in false reports about me, which they sometimes do at the rate of three times a day, I can't come and go from my own home without harassment. All the time when doctors are ordering me to avoid stress. And the criminals know all these facts and what they're doing.

The criminals in my own neighborhood, they're actually, some of them live right next door, and what they're trying to do is chase me out of my home, so that they can first vandalize it and then harass the authorities to tear it down as a fire hazard for the purpose of achieving for themselves more room. They've stated that they want to tear down my house so they'll have more room. They've told me this.

And so they really go way, way out to make it happen, and then in the newspapers recently, in the local newspaper, there's a feud between various political factions in McKees Rocks. The Mayor and the officials at the top of the Police Department are both accusing each other of wrongdoing, which includes picking on certain innocent businesses and innocent citizens to misuse police powers to harass them, and I know for a fact that this is true because that's what they've been doing to me. So that complicates things.

So what motivated me to find Working Order here was a desire to move out of that place. I own my own house, but it's not worth anything because of where it is. I can't sell it to get anything. I owe money on it anyway, back taxes that weren't paid and that have accumulated and mushroomed, so I'm sort of stuck.

End of Track 4

It's a strange situation and I've faced this before, where unless I can function with a certain level of ability to get the financial wherewithal to pull myself out of this situation, I can't overcome disability. In other words to overcome disability, in other words to defeat disability, I have to be able. To defeat the result or the consequences of disability, I have to already be able. It's like a...

Catch 22.

Yeah, yeah, it's a Catch 22.

When did you acknowledge that you were disabled?

When I finally acknowledged it?

Like what year?

Well, 1988 was when I was injured, and 1991 was when I first applied for Disability. I still have trouble using the word “disabled” concerning myself, especially when I see people in wheelchairs and I’m walking.

Why is that?

I don’t want to be disabled.

Why?

Cause I just want to be able to do everything I want to do. I don’t to have something in my mind, or I don’t want to admit that I can’t do things. The only way I used to function before was a strong back and great determination. That’s what I had. That was me. And I have to learn how to be a different person, and along the way, as my condition changes, I have to learn how to be a different person, then learn how to be a different person again. Because I am making progress. And still, as I achieve rehabilitation, to whatever degree, as I’m able to do more things, I still have a tendency to want to go back to my old ways.

You have your natural way of achieving things. I don’t know whether it’s biological, or whether it’s learned at a very young age or something, but I’ll tell you what, if I had a normal body right now, and I could do all the things I used to do, I would probably just go right back to the way I was. I’ve learned things, I’ve learned coping strategies along the way, and it’s complicated by the fact that the coping strategies are not -- I don’t need to have as much of them now as I used to need. There’s natural tendencies, or something. When I was young I learned how to do what I wanted to do, and I still haven’t adjusted.

With this business plan that we’re working on and these machines to build these cabinets and everything, this was actually something I was working on before I became hurt. I had never been able to bring that to fruition because that’s very complicated, and in the end, if I achieve that, and I realized that before I was hurt – in the end, if I can achieve this, then my productivity is going to go way up. But I never had the demand, the market, I never developed a market, to create enough demand that would force me to develop all that machinery to make these things, and now, even though I always wanted to do that anyway. But now my situation is such that I could possibly bring everything to a satisfactory resolution if I can achieve this old goal prior to disability after becoming hurt. Then I can delude myself into thinking I’m not disabled.

Because I can walk and everything, people don’t know there’s any problem at all. And also, even friends that I’ve met since I got hurt. I was like mentally dull and everything when I met them, and it’s like they don’t know me any other way. They don’t know that there was any difference, and so as they see changes in me, as I progress, they’re like amazed, cause “well that’s not you.” Well, yes it is. It’s like back more towards what I

was before. It's not all the way back. You guys never saw me when I wasn't disabled. That's what it is.

I'm sorry, there was a question I wanted to answer that you brought up there, but I just lost the question or the matter.

The question I asked was just about kind of coming to terms with being disabled. I don't know if it registered or not. It doesn't always help me either.

Oh, the point I wanted to make was there's two different aspects to being, uh, if you're disabled and you look disabled, then "Okay, that's it." Everything is right there, as far as – I mean, if someone who is in a wheelchair, you see them in a wheelchair. Okay they're in a wheelchair and you know this. They have some sort of physical problem that keeps them in a wheelchair. But you have a disability that's not readily apparent, and that has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are people will treat you normally, and not treat you in kind of a special way, either less or more because you're disabled. If they treat you more friendly, sometimes that can seem condescending, and if they see you in a wheelchair, they might just like brush you off and be rude to you. Disabled people will get that, too. Both of those things are difficult to deal with.

But if you don't appear disabled, you don't get that. At least from strangers. On the other hand, if you don't appear disabled, and you are disabled, and criminals find you, then they can manipulate appearances in such a way that it can be very bad. You're vulnerable, but you don't appear to be vulnerable, and the things they can do are very harmful.

It's very interesting. We were talking earlier about the meaning of "disabled," and what that means, especially, well, sometimes the visible can make it easier, but –

Yeah, I wouldn't have necessarily known that before I experienced it.

Is there any advice you could give to anybody?

Advice? I've made a lot of mistakes along the way, and I've suffered a lot because I was too nice.

End of Track 5

The woman that ran the car into my motorcycle was drunk, but that didn't go on the official report and I didn't say anything to the state trooper, even though I knew she was hiding it from him. But I didn't realize what was ahead of me. If I had realized what I was facing, I would have said, "She's drunk."

And then I wouldn't have had all these financial problems, cause there was this catastrophic drunk fund available at the time, and I would have been a perfect candidate

for that, so my situation would be much, much different now. But do I advise people not to be nice?

Maybe be aware, be more aware of what can happen, because all these extra things have made my suffering actually much worse.

Do you have any family for support?

Well, I've described something about what some of them have done, and when I achieved an insurance settlement and got some back money from Social Security and all that, they suddenly appeared and were very concerned about me until they took my money, and then they weren't concerned any more.

Most folks we interviewed, the real thing is, the ones that have done the best, the ones with a lot of family, a strong family support system.

Yeah, I think I would have been better off with being an orphan. I would have been better off not ever thinking that I had a family, because what they ended up doing was -- really came down on the other side. They just made things worse.

How did you hear about this project?

Carol from Working Order told me and she suggested I might be a good candidate for this.

Well, thank you so much. We really appreciate it.