

Why Suncor's Mike Barker Advocates for Accessibility

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The morning was calm and quiet when Mike climbed into the passenger's seat of a truck to make the commute to his worksite south of Fort McMurray, Alta. Both he and the driver were Suncor summer students in 2006, each taking turns driving to work.

It was Mike's turn to sit back and nap on the drive, so he reclined his seat and dozed off. He was startled awake as the truck hit a ditch along Highway 63, the only road leading in and out of town.

"The truck was upside down and I was having difficulty breathing, so I was mostly focused on trying to breathe, not on what happened," says Mike. "It took a couple of hours to get me out of the truck using the Jaws of Life. But once I got out, I was in good spirits; joking around with everyone and laughing."

Fortunately, both Mike and the driver survived the accident, but Mike had a spinal injury that left him paralyzed.

"I'm paralyzed from the chest down and technically classified as a quadriplegic because I lost some use of my hands as well as my legs," explains Mike. "I was also burned on my legs and needed skin grafts, but because of my spinal injury, I didn't feel much pain."

Since the accident, Mike has become a passionate accessibility advocate, working to raise awareness of everyday tasks that can be challenging for those with disabilities.

"There are so many 'invisible,' life-changing accessibility features that make navigating the world easier for me," says Mike. "A lot of time, thought, care and the voices of countless people with disabilities and allies have advocated for these benefits and I'm privileged to take advantage of them."

Although features like ramps, elevators, automatic doors and accessible washroom stalls are familiar to all of us, there are other accessibility tools that are less obvious such as alt text on images in a social media feed, and screen readers for computers and mobile devices.

"Things like being able to use the tap feature debit and credit card machines; taking my kids to tourist attractions designed with accessibility in mind ensuring I have a clear view; not having to worry if my wheelchair will fit through doorways or having hand controls installed in rental cars are just some 'luxuries' that would be less common had I been injured a decade before."

Mike returned to Suncor as a student the following summer, and eventually met another student who would later become his wife.

"At this point, after meeting my wife and raising two amazing young girls, the accident seems like a lifetime ago. But because of it, accessibility will always be a part my life," he says.

Almost 20 years after the accident, Mike now works for Suncor as an accounts payable administrator and is an active member in Suncor's accessibility employee inclusion network, enABLE. Through the network he hosts regular sessions on accessibility, providing a safe space for persons with disabilities, caregivers and allies to discuss a range of disability related topics.

"Many people don't speak up about things they know will make their life easier, often because they're worried about what their colleagues might think," adds Mike. "But when we are vulnerable and open up, we give our coworkers the chance to help make this an even better place to work."

National AccessAbility Week runs from May 28 to June 3, and is an opportunity to celebrate the valuable contributions and leadership of persons with disabilities, highlight the work of people, organizations and communities that are removing barriers and improving accessibility, and reflect on the ongoing efforts to become more accessible and more inclusive.

View additional multimedia and more ESG storytelling from Suncor Energy on 3blmedia.com.

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