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Life-changing accident won't keep Baxter from enjoying high school reunion



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There will likely be plenty of success stories tossed about when Regina High School's graduating classmates from 1994 get together for their 20th reunion in Corner Brook this weekend.

Old school chums will boast about the career paths they have embarked on or maybe about the latest exploits of their own growing families.

Mike Baxter is planning to attend, but success for him is a relative term.

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Mike Baxter is planning to attend Regina High School's 20th reunion with the class of 1994.

Not long after finishing high school, Baxter headed off to Alberta and took a job driving truck. On the morning of July 14, 2000, he was returning home to Grand Prairie from a side trip

to Edmonton in his own car. He had gotten some rest at a truck stop during the night, but was still feeling tired when he headed out on the last leg home early the next morning.

He was only 45 minutes from being home, so he decided to keep going.

The next thing Baxter remembers is being awakened by the impact of his car going off the road and hitting an embankment. The car flew 80 feet into the air before flipping three times. It stopped, upside down, leaving Baxter with a broken neck and two collapsed lungs.

He is lucky to be alive, but his life was forever changed in that instant. With a C6 and C7 spinal cord injury, Baxter was left paralyzed from the chest down. The injuries to his lungs have left him with a 53 per cent capacity to breathe.

He's been living back in Corner Brook since returning from Alberta in December 2000, following weeks in the hospital and months of rehabilitation.

When his classmates decided to start up a Facebook group to discuss plans for their reunion this summer, Baxter was compelled to write a message to the group. In it, he wanted to dispel the rumours that he was intoxicated or may have been speeding when the accident happened.

"I was just stubborn not to pull over and, because of that, now I am a quadriplegic," he posted to the group.

Some in the group had no idea about the accident. Others praised him for his courage and couldn't wait to talk to him.

Most of Baxter's closest friends were not in his high school graduating class. He hung out with friends who were mostly either older or in younger grades.

In the last 14 years, even some of his good friends have found it uncomfortable to talk to him.

"Some friends who were friends all my life tell me they don't know how to approach me," he said. "I just tell them, 'man, I'm in a wheelchair because I broke my neck. I'm no different.'"

He has limited strength in his left hand and virtually none in his right, but Baxter tries to live life the best he can. He does 600 pushups every second day to maintain enough upper body strength to allow him to ride a snowmobile and drive his truck in addition to his powered wheelchair.

A few years ago, he went to Halifax, N.S. where he got to play some full-contact wheelchair rugby.

"And I mean hit 'em and knock 'em right over — like, yee-haw, right?," he recalled with excitement.

He'd like to see more resources and opportunities for people in wheelchairs in the Corner Brook area. He has a three-wheeled cycle with hand-powered pedals, but finds Corner Brook too hilly to use it a lot, considering his weakened hands and diminished lung capacity.

"Not being able to walk is frustrating enough, not being able to use my hands on a daily basis drives me nuts."

He's not too concerned about anyone feeling uneasy about striking up a conversation during the reunion festivities this weekend. He's not interested in being a focus of their sympathy.

He's going to enjoy the reunion like everyone else. Other than ensuring wheelchair-accessible venues, he doesn't want any special treatment.

"At first, I was embarrassed and shy to do this or do that," said Baxter. "Now, I don't really care anymore. People can ask me whatever they want. I can't dwell on my story. It is what it is and that's life."

Perhaps another post he made to the Facebook group sums up Baxter's positive perspective on the hand life has dealt to him since his carefree high school days.

"I'm just very happy ... I never hurt no one else or even killed someone by hitting another vehicle ..." he wrote, "k... (sic) how I look at it, someone always got it worse, which is sad, but very true."