

Stretching the Bonds of Paralysis

Colin Javens recounts the story of his incredible journey across Africa

My 20th year was wonderful: 'gapping' it for the first three months in Kenya, farming with my Godfather in the Rift Valley, and then starting in Perth, and taking seven months to drive around the whole of Australia. It was a magical time.



A Camping weekend just before my accident with fellow Harper students: L-R: Wayne Brown, me, Stuart Greg, Guy Streeter and Will Baker

In my 21st year, 2000, however, I made the biggest mistake of my life. I dived into water that was too shallow and broke my neck. Paralysed from the shoulders down, with limited arm movement, I now had to face the prospect of acute medical care, a year's rehabilitation, and getting to grips with the fact that I would spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair. The biggest despair clouded those first months.

But somewhere in that year, I discovered that the only way I could confront this new and very different life was to live it to the maximum of my capability, which wasn't much, I have to say. I returned to Harper Adams six weeks after being released from Stoke Mandeville Spinal Unit and for the next two years made a somewhat frustrated attempt at completing my

degree in Agricultural Marketing. Due to the fact that I am totally reliant on somebody else to help me with the most basic part of my life, like getting dressed and showering, which can take up to two and half hours every morning I was absolutely exhausted by the time I got to my first lecture. In fact, I was asleep within minutes in my first lecture. The lecturers were long suffering, as was the establishment, which I have to say was really fantastic. They bent over backwards to make my life comfortable and enhance my prospects of doing well in my degree.

Nearing the end of my degree and contemplating the next chapter of my life my resolve to undertake my childhood dream of driving across Africa, home to Kenya, became very firmly entrenched in my mind. I left Harper Adams in July 2003, with all the skills needed to focus my attention on making my dream come true.

Driving Home was born, the name given to my prospective expedition. In January 2004, an old family friend, Derek Breed, came on board. He gave of himself, his friends and his monetary resources in a way which was simply phenomenal. The Colin Javens Spinal Injury Trust was conceived and developed with Derek at its helm as Chairman of the Trustees. Caroline Orange and Jo Stocks were employed as Project Managers and the preparation for Driving Home began in earnest.

The focus of the expedition had changed. It was no longer just a mission to accomplish a boy's dream; it was now an awareness and fund-raising campaign for the spinally

injured. The goal we were all working towards was raising one million pounds for research into the repair of spinal cord damage.

Twenty six months of planning, preparation, sweat and toil culminated in the launch of the Driving Home expedition on 7th November 2005. Two vehicles, Beryl, my adapted Discovery, and Brenda, our workhorse Defender, left Stoke Mandeville Hospital in the gloom of the autumn afternoon headed for the ferry at Portsmouth. My team included Chris Parsons, recruited as the Expedition Medic; Ben Matthews - navigator; Kiko Matthews - communications; Chrissy Prydun, my PA, and Richard Wood (an ex-Harper engineer) as mechanic.



Some of the adaptations which enabled me to drive the Discovery

Expedition Diary 9 November 2005

Expedition launch at Stoke Mandeville

It was brilliant to see everyone at the launch - including Mollen Rock [www.mollenrock.co.uk] showing the off-road wheelchair that had been built for us.

Expedition Diary 23 November 2005

Location: Libya

We head towards the border Ras Ajdir along a road strewn with men waving Libyan Dinars at us, colourful petrol containers stacked high and the occasional animal hanging dead outside a shop. Goats, sheep and heads of cows hang, with or without their skin, ready to be cut and barbequed in these small cafes.

Expedition Diary 4 December 2005

Location: Motel Salma, Giza, East Cairo, Egypt

Morning chorus at around 5 am but this was not the usual springtime birds but the calling of the people to prayer. The noise is crazy because it's a mixture of different mosques from around the area and it's a mixture of singing, wailing, humming ... it slightly resembles dogs howling (musical dogs!).

Expedition Diary 25 December 2005

Location: Hotel in Dongola, Sudan

Christmas in the Sudan! Ours was spent with a 6am rise because we were all so excited to see what Santa had brought us! Christmas carols were sung with backing music from our mobile ringtones - ingenious! We made a camp fire because it was particularly chilly, what with all the freshly fallen snow! Yes, it's the first year that Sudan has had a white Christmas! We put the carrot on the snowman's nose and then headed off towards Dongola.

Expedition Diary 9 January 2006

Location: The Green Hotel, Yabelo, Ethiopia

Sunrise with Colobus monkeys, amazing flowers, loads of birds and scenery was the perfect way to start an early morning. The scenery in Ethiopia is amazing - the landscape, plants and people change every step you take. Those big wide smiles and children shouting and waving is exhilarating (you have to block out and forget the begging money scamming!) Today, we drove through fir forests, scrub land, red soil, sand, tropical forest, had papaya, coffee, pineapples and potatoes for sale on the road side ... every 50 km was different.

Expedition Diary 10 January 2006

Location: Moyale KWS campsite, Kenya border

Welcome Home!

I had been feeling incredible excited over the last week at the thought of arriving in Kenya, but by now it was really beginning to boil up inside. After years of planning and 65 days on the road we were flying down the road proudly flying the Kenyan flag. We reached Moyale (the border town) and drove down a road bustling with people, sheep and donkeys. We drove under a string barrier and crossed into Kenya - where we were asked to take the Kenyan flag down because they thought I was a Kenyan MP I yelled out, 'Don't worry, I know the way! Follow me!' Five minutes later we were lost and boy, I still haven't lived it down yet. Half an hour later we found our campsite and celebrated with a warm Tusker beer.

Expedition Diary 28 January 2006

Location: Kenya Paraplegic Association, Nairobi

The expedition team had organised a dinner and dance in Hereford specifically for our African beneficiaries. Originally KPO was set up purely to provide wheelchairs for people who had suffered from a SCI in Kenya. The average person only receives an average of \$1/day and with wheelchairs costing \$200 it is virtually impossible for an

individual to buy one. However they quickly realised that KPO had the potential to support their members in other ways.

Expedition Diary 15 February 2006

Location: Kilimanjaro Association of the Spinal Injured, Moshi, Tanzania

KASI was formed in 1993: one of their initiatives at the moment is to train female members to make batiks and tie dye cloths providing them with a way to generate income.

Expedition Diary 17 February 2006

Location: Arusha, Tanzania



By a white building with a metal roof was a lady in her sixties sitting in a wheelchair in the shade of a banana tree. Pricilla only just had enough movement to shrug her shoulders. She sustained her injury in 1984 when she slipped over in the wet season whilst carrying farm produce on her head. There are a higher proportion of injured ladies here (as they tend to do all of the lifting and carrying) than in other parts of Africa. Try to imagine - you can't move yourself at all, you are unable to read, you have no TV or radio to keep you entertained and you have to rely on your family for absolutely everything.

Expedition Diary 7 March 2006

Location: Lusaka, Zambia

David Mukwasa, one of the co-founders of Disacare, our third charity in Africa, took us on a guided tour of the workshops where they make the wheelchairs from scratch and showed us the seven wheelchairs that our donated money had funded. Owing to the recent strengthening of the Kwacha against the dollar our donation was no longer able to fund the 12 wheelchairs we had hoped. Amazingly Price Waterhouse had agreed to make up the shortfall.

Expedition Diary 18 April 2006

Location: Cape Town, South Africa

We had a visit from Ari Seirits from QuadPara Association of South Africa. QASA assist paraplegics and quadriplegics by providing a range of highly specialised support services to encourage their rehabilitation, community integration and independence. They run self help centres around South Africa where their members live with minimal assistance and in the most independent way possible.

In South Africa there is little government support and terrible amenities for wheelchair users. What's more, in rural areas the shocking life expectancy for spinal cord injuries is less than one year.

The full diary can be viewed on the Driving Home website:
www.drivinghome.co.uk

Or visit
www.colinjavens.com
to see a short video of the trip

Expedition Diary 20 April 2006

Cape Point celebrations: the end of the journey

Total Mileage: 22,0014km

Countries visited: 12

Days: 164

Vegetable Curries: 1 trillion, 2 naans and 1 grandpah

Punctures: 3

Vehicles stuck: 2 [Woody driving Brenda en route to Khartoum in some sand and Col driving Beryl in our first day in Zambia becomes stuck in a muddy car park]

Arguments: 1

Times falling out of the wheelchair: 1

Animal Carcasses picked up: 11

Hottest Place: Lake Turkana, Kenya

Muggiest Place: Moshi, Tanzania

Coldest Place: French Alps, France and Simien Mountains, Ethiopia

Wettest Place: Zambia!

Windiest Place: Chalbi Desert, Kenya

Five Best Camping Spots:

Outside under the stars in the Chalbi Desert, Kenya



Sleeping out underneath the stars, in the Chalbi Desert in Northern Kenya - something I never thought I would do again.

High up in the Simien Mountains around a fire, Ethiopia [New Years Eve]

In the remote Nubian Desert with trillions of stars, Nile Route, Sudan [Christmas Eve]

By Lake Lagano, with views of the lake lapping from my tent, Ethiopia

On a windy fishing beach with an awesome sunset, Gabes, Tunisia

Best swim: Shiwa Ngandu, Hot Springs, Zambia



The first swim since my accident

I just couldn't wait to cross the Mediterranean and land on African soil. As it turned out we almost never made it to Africa. In Italy, after a long day's driving, we pulled into the campsite just as night was drawing in. I wheeled myself over to the shower block. I was spasming badly; the body's way of telling a tetraplegic that something is wrong. It transpired that the cup of tea handed to me just before I wheeled away had spilt; the resultant burns to my legs were third degree. When the blistering passed and the enormity of the burns were revealed I was simply shocked that I couldn't feel something so obviously sore on my body! The ever-vigilant doc monitored and dressed the burns; pictures were emailed to Stoke Mandeville and the continuation of our trip was sanctioned.

After an enforced period of rest we got back on the road: Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania – wonderful, wonderful times. When we got to Zambia, however, my skin started to deteriorate and I was plagued with pressure sores, the bane of a tetraplegic's life. I had lost a quarter of my body weight - the future of the trip was seriously questioned. As a result, I spent four weeks laid on my back, allowing just enough time for the pressure sores to heal. I was near despair – we had come so far, I just couldn't contemplate the concept of not reaching our destination. It was an incredibly difficult time for the team and the first time there had been any tension between us.

In the end, we were resolved that the alternative was not an option. The team made me a cushion through which my derriere poked in a most undignified fashion. We had concluded that hoisting me in and out of the Land Rover, to and from my chair and then into bed was exacerbating the sores so the team removed the seat from the Land Rover and the hoist moves were seriously reduced; easier on me, harder, much harder for the team. Our decision was to race for the end – we'd done approximately 20,000 of the 22,000 kilometres; we had southern Zambia, Botswana and South Africa to do before reaching the Cape and we just had to complete the journey.

And we did! It took five days to do the last 2,300 km, arriving at Cape Point on Easter Monday, 17th April 2006. It was a magical feeling; a triumph for the disabled generally and a huge accolade for my team. I sat and thought of all the things which had changed in my life but now I realised it was me who had changed; I had been forced to accept what had happened and in that acceptance had found the ability to move on. 22,000 km of Africa's hardest and worst roads. I had an overwhelming sensation of gratitude to all the people who had contributed to me doing this amazing thing. The team and the Trustees were my foremost thoughts, the hospitality of all those along the way who had thrown open their homes for all six of us, all the hundreds of people who had contributed in any way prior to and during the trip, our many sponsors; and my family whose wholehearted support had been unequivocal right from the start.

My ungainly body sat bonily in that undignified Land Rover chair but my spirit soared; I might not be able to physically feel anything below the shoulders, but in that magical moment I could spiritually feel the kindness and generosity of everyone who had contributed and in some strange way I felt that it was almost as if each of those concerned could sense the elation which suffused my emotions.

News Update 22/03/2007

I am absolutely delighted to tell you that Colin won the Reader's Digest Award: Local Hero of the Year 2006. Editor-in-Chief Katherine Walker said, "We have NEVER had such an overwhelming response to a nomination before".

Colin attended a wonderful Awards Ceremony on 23rd February at the Reader's Digest Canary Wharf Offices in London. It is accolade indeed from such a prestigious and world-known magazine.

So if you made up part of this overwhelming response – thank you very much indeed!

With kindest regards from both Colin and me!

Val Javens

Spinal Research WMB

Charity No 281325

