



'BREAKING MY NECK MADE ME A STRONGER PERSON'

Colin Javens, 25, is on an incredible 16,000km journey, from Britain to Cape Town, to raise funds for spinal injury charities in the UK and Africa

Six years ago, during the summer of 2000, after my first year of university, I took off on holiday to the Isle of Wight with friends but had an accident that changed my life forever – I broke my neck.

I was on the pier with some friends. There was a small ferry to my left so I presumed that the water was deep enough and dived in. One split second later, my neck was broken. I was pulled out of the sea and, lying on the jetty, I couldn't feel anything. I knew then that I was in serious trouble, though I still didn't understand the full implications of my injury.

I was airlifted to Southampton Hospital. I remember the flight being noisy and uncomfortable. I was alone, strapped into the stretcher. When I arrived, I had an MRI scan and, two days later, the smashed vertebrae were removed and replaced with a bone graft from my hip. My neck was pinned with a titanium plate. The doctor told me that I had broken my neck and probably wouldn't walk again, but he also said that there was the possibility of movement returning within the first six to 12 months.

I was moved to Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury – where they specialise in the rehabilitation of spinally injured people. There, I had three more operations but it wasn't until the autumn that they told me I was permanently paralysed from the shoulders down. I had to relearn all the fundamental skills I had learnt as a child. I was like a baby again.

“THE DOCTOR TOLD ME THAT I PROBABLY WOULDN'T WALK AGAIN

Six months later, I discovered that I still had a small grip movement in my right hand – I could do things like pick up a cup of tea on my own rather than drink it through a straw. This helped regain a little of my much-loved independence. I could consider driving again – a freedom I desperately missed.

Determined to leave the hospital in Stoke within a year, I left after 364 days – my first new ambition achieved. After returning home to Hereford, I went on two outdoor pursuit courses, learnt to use a computer and tried to draw and paint again. I also started researching grants for adapted vehicles. Two years later, I had a transit van adapted for me so that I could drive just using hand controls. I practised for months on a deserted airstrip near my home. Once, I crashed the van into a wall when the hand controls fell off! My mum was with me at the time and she was quite shaken by it all.

In 2003 I returned to agricultural college and finished my degree. They adapted my room and provided another room for my personal assistant. I was able to be independent and maintain old friendships.



Seeing the living conditions in Africa made Colin feel lucky

I've always been adventure mad, loved the outdoors, and been passionate about travelling. I'd been to far-flung places like Alaska, Mexico and Australia. It had always been a childhood dream to drive from London to Cape Town, but it wasn't until my final year at uni that I had the idea to drive out to Kenya. I was born, spent my early years there and still went back to visit old friends.

By early January 2004, I'd finalised grants, rounded up friends to join me, set up a website and begun fundraising. I wanted to be the first person in my situation to complete a potentially hazardous journey and raise funds and awareness for spinal injury research in Africa and the UK. After a year of preparation, we set off on our adventure on 7 November from Stoke Mandeville Hospital, waved off by 100 people, three TV crews and a live radio broadcast.

So far we've been through Jersey, France, Italy, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania. I have seen so much suffering – people with SCI (Spinal Cord Injury) in Africa are only expected to live for a couple of years and most can't afford wheelchairs. One paralysed lady we met hadn't left her bedroom in years. In the UK, I have a personal assistant provided by government support. I also have equipment; at home I have an adjustable bed, pressure-relieving mattress, adapted bathroom, shower-chair, ramps, access to medical equipment, medical care and adapted vehicles. She had none of these things.

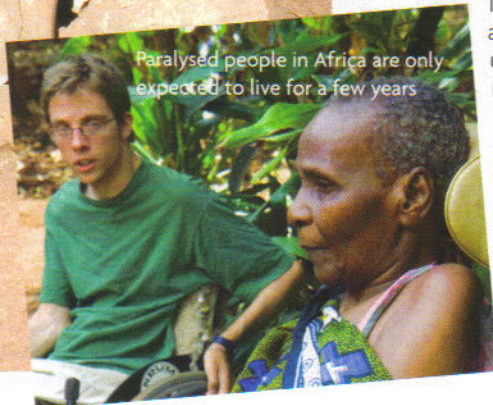
Some of the £400,000 we've raised so far has already been given to disability projects in Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania – we have visited all these places to make sure that the funds have been spent properly.

It was emotional meeting old friends back in Kenya who I hadn't seen since my accident. I was so happy to be back – and achieve another goal.

At one point, the expedition was threatened because I burnt my legs by spilling a cup of tea. My body is slow to heal, so the wounds continue to weep. Fortunately, our doctor has been great and we're managing to keep them clean. We have now crossed the border into Zambia and expect to arrive in Cape Town on 17 April – we can't be late as there are lots of events planned for our arrival! From May, I will be back in the UK, busy with more fundraisers.

I want to show the world that people with disabilities can achieve amazing things and shouldn't be sidelined. My advice would be to get out there and follow your dreams – you never know what's round the corner.

■ Colin and his team hope to raise £1million for spinal injuries charities. For more information call 01483 898840 or visit www.drivinghome.co.uk



Paralysed people in Africa are only expected to live for a few years