

Walking by Faith

The Story of Andrew DeVries

**As told to
Michael J. Dowling**



Athletics had always been the most important thing in my life. In fact, at age fifty-five, standing six-foot-six, I had just tried out for the Michigan Senior Men's Olympic Volleyball team, and there was a good chance I was going to make it.

Then, in a motorcycle accident, I shattered my left leg. Doctors prescribed amputation.

As I lay in the hospital bed contemplating life without a leg, a young physician's assistant named Sarah Scholl said, "Andy, what kind of golf balls do you play?"

That was an idiotic question, but I told her, "Titleist Pro V1." The next morning, a 12-pack of Titleist Pro V1 golf balls was by my bed. Sarah's gift gave me a glimmer of hope.

Awaking after surgery, I was surprised to find that I still had my leg. The doctors had decided it to try to save it. But months of rehabilitation lay ahead. In a subsequent operation, I almost died on the table.

When it was time to move to a rehabilitation hospital, Sarah wheeled me to the ambulance. "I have a favor to ask of you," she said. "My father died some time ago. When I get married, I want you to walk me down the aisle."

"Sarah, it's doubtful I'll be walking anywhere. Besides, you don't even have a boyfriend."

"Someday I will," she said.

Hope and love

I had reconciled to living the rest of my life in a wheelchair. One day, while at the rehabilitation hospital, I got a call from John Wilder, my volleyball coach. "Congratulations, Andy, you made the team! You're playing in the Senior Olympics."

I told him about my accident and waited for him to say he'd miss having me on the team. But Wilder shocked me: "You get better. I'll play you if you can just stand up."

His words ignited a spark. I went at rehabilitation with a vengeance. Seven months later I was able to show up for the Senior Olympics. Although I could barely stand, John kept his word: he put me in the game.

When it came my turn to serve, I looked at my wife, Kay, sitting in the stands. She usually shunned my athletic events. I couldn't blame her. I had always put sports before her in my life.

But today Kay was not only there, she was smiling. As I gazed at her radiant face, I lost it. Suddenly I understood why God had allowed this accident. He cared that much about our marriage.

Life from death

Back home, with the gold medal our team had won on the mantle, my health continued to improve. Then, my liver shut down. In a major surgery, doctors bypassed it with a shunt.

That saved my life, but unfiltered blood reaching my brain sometimes caused my hands to shake so violently I had to sit on them. I applied for a liver transplant and waited.

A year went by, then two. No call from the transplant hospital. How does one pray for a transplant? For me to live, someone else had to die. What makes me better than someone else's husband, or someone else's father?

One day it occurred to me that this wasn't the first time someone needed to die so I could live. Jesus had done that for me. If God loved me that much, I could trust him with my future.

It what seemed to be a divinely inspired conversation, we learned that Indiana had twice as many registered organ donors as Michigan, so we rented an apartment in Indianapolis. Within two months we received a call: a man had died in an accident; I was one of ten transplant candidates who would benefit.

Through the valley

The speed of my recuperation amazed the doctors. For the first time in five years, I subscribed to a magazine in my name. But I pushed too hard. While doing sit-ups on an inclined board, I ripped the incision in my abdominal muscles.

During emergency surgery, doctors put mesh inside my abdomen and sewed the muscles in place. They inserted a tube up through my nose and down into my stomach to pump out fluids.

After surgery, I had to sit in bed in one position without moving and without food. One day dragged by...then two...then three. The second hand on the clock seemed to stand still. How much longer would this agony last? I had never felt so hopeless and miserable.

Around 4:00 a.m. of the fourth night—the longest night of my life—I cried out to God: "Lord, take me! I can't do this any longer." Kay was by my side, where she had faithfully been ever since my accident. She murmured, "Nor can I."

At that point Kay and I completely gave up. We were at the absolute bottom of the valley—the blackest hole we could imagine.

Fifteen minutes later, our surgeon unexpectedly entered the room and said, "I woke up in the middle of the night with the feeling something had changed." He looked over my vitals. "We can take the tube out."

By the end of that day I was walking. One month later, I went back to work full time.

Jumping and walking for joy

My left leg had no nerves, so I figured my volleyball days were over. But my exercise therapist had an idea. She strapped my knees and ankles together so I could jump rope.

I worked up to two jumps...then six...then twenty! I was so excited I phoned an old volleyball teammate: "Hey, Tim, I can jump!"

"That's great! We've got a volleyball tournament in Milwaukee in two weeks. Come and play?"

At the last minute, I decided to go. When I showed up, my old teammates stood and cheered.

The first five games were tough, but in the sixth game I got a perfect set and a legitimate kill. A few minutes later I blocked for game point.

That taught me an important lesson: Don't waste time wishing you could do the impossible. Just do your best and sometimes the impossible happens.

After the game, I thanked my old coach, John Wilder, for inspiring me. "You're the one who deserves the credit," John said. "You never gave up."

"Actually, John, I did give up, but God never gave up on me."

In 2009, seven years after my accident, I received an e-mail from Sarah Scholl: "I have a boyfriend—will you come?"

What a joy it was walking, not wheelchairs, Sarah down the aisle.

Andy DeVries is a director of development at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A complete journal of his journey is posted on caringbridge.org under the name "andydevries." His website has had more than 25,000 hits.