

Faith to go forward: After terrible accident, young man finds solace

Story by [Alejandro Dominguez](#), photos by Sarah Weiser, The Herald

SNOHOMISH -- David Ricci swings his left leg out of the car and vaults himself onto his crutches. He makes his way across the parking lot to the Mill Creek Foursquare Church youth services in Lynnwood on a Sunday evening earlier this month.

Teenagers are outside playing. Some say hi and others hug him. One of them whispers a question about Ricci as he hops toward the church.

"He's David. He got hit by a train," someone says.

It's raining, so most of the kids are inside. Some of them are close to the entrance, where Ricci stops.

He gets hugs from friends. He receives a plateful of cookies and a card that reads, "We love you David."

Ricci, 20, served as a counselor for the church's youth services when he was in high school. On this evening, Ricci comes as a special speaker. This is the first time he has returned to the youth services since the accident that cost him his right leg this summer.

He sits in a chair before dozens and dozens of teenagers -- a packed room.

Ricci doesn't hold back. For 30 minutes, he tells them about his trip to India with a mission to spread the word of Christ, he tells them about the train and he tells them about his pain.

After losing his leg, he chose to look at it as a way of being closer to God.

It is not, Ricci says, a story about loss or sadness.

"I don't want my life to be about sadness," Ricci tells the crowd. "I want it to be about joy."

Ricci prays with others during the youth services meeting at Mill Creek Foursquare Church on Oct. 2. During the meeting, David spoke about how his faith has become stronger since he lost his leg in a train accident in India. [\[Photo gallery\]](#)

It was to be a summer of teaching art and guitar to orphans through a program in Calcutta connected with a Mother Theresa-related charity. Ricci trained for four months in Montana with a group called Youth With A Mission to work with children who live with HIV infection and AIDS.

He arrived in India in late May and spent four weeks tending to the orphans and speaking the word of God. The trip was to last three months, but it would end abruptly.

On the morning of June 28, Ricci and a group of volunteers walked through the slums to get to the orphanage. At a small train stop, he and the others walked between train tracks, avoiding trash heaped on the ground and the rest of the filth in the area.

It was very noisy. Ricci never heard the train.

The train hooked Ricci's right sleeve. His body was flipped and his right leg landed under the train. He was dragged 100 yards before the train stopped.

People surrounded him as his right leg was pinned beneath one of the train's steel wheels. He remembers an Englishman talked to him. Hands reached out and pulled him out. Ricci was carried to a sidewalk littered with trash.

From there, the crowd took him to a nearby clinic. In the commotion, he was given an oxygen mask -- upside down and turned off. He was suffocating. Somebody finally turned it on.

"The last thing I remember is I was walking to the orphanage," Ricci said. "And then I woke up without a leg."

His memories of this time are fleeting, and the ones he has returned weeks after the accident. He sees flashes of the surgery performed while he was still awake, the pain of his right leg being sawed off above the knee.

The news made its way home almost immediately. Cheryl Perron, Ricci's mother, got a call at their Snohomish home from someone at Youth With A Mission about the accident half an hour after it happened.

"I thought it was a joke," she said.

She spent anxious hours waiting to learn more.

"I didn't know if he was still alive."

Perron, her husband and youngest son traveled to San Francisco to get visas. Ricci's two grown sisters remained in the U.S. Five days after the accident, the family reunited with Ricci at the clinic. When he was in stable condition, he was transferred to a hospital.

He wasn't doing well.

His leg throbbed with pain, despite the medication he was given at the hospital. His waking thoughts kept coming back to his lost leg. It hurt so bad that he felt life wasn't worth living.

"I was thinking, 'I want to die.' "

Then one day, he held his iPod and started listening to his music. He listened to "Mango Tree" by the Angus and Julia Stone, a sibling duo. Something changed inside him.

"I started crying out of joy," he said. "I felt happy. I felt God was reaching out to me. He was telling me to keep fighting."

Ricci gives his brother, Tyler Perron, 13, a hug before leaving for his youth services meeting at Mill Creek Foursquare Church on Oct. 2. [\[Photo gallery\]](#)

Two weeks after the accident, Ricci and his family flew back to the United States.

With layovers in China, Russia and Alaska, it took a full day.

He was taken to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. It was there that his friends visited him -- so much that they had to make appointments.

After he was discharged, the visits stopped.

Ricci blames himself, in part, about this. He realized he wasn't reaching out to people, and they did not know how to react to his situation. They thought he wanted to be left alone.

He felt lonely.

He thought nobody understood what he was going through. He felt he was different than the other patients at Harborview, even in a support group with others who had lost limbs. He felt those talks in that group were depressing, Ricci said.

He suffered because he could do little for himself. He needed help for everything, including getting a glass of water.

"Things really changed," he said. "I was very dependent on my parents and little brother

about everything."

People who have lost a limb can struggle to find a new role within a family, said Dr.

Janna Friedly, a physician in the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine at Harborview and a University of Washington assistant professor. Friedly has seen people who have lost a limb go through personality changes. They can suffer from symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, such as nightmares and sleeplessness. They also can feel depressed and isolated from others. Losing a limb can be similar to losing a family member, she said.

There are also patients who use the experience to change their lives for the better, she said.

"They use it to overcome a difficulty in their lives," she said. "They look at their lives in a different way."

To fight the depression, a patient needs to find a passion to help him or her cope. This could mean faith, music or even family and friends.

"Having good social support is critical," Friedly said.

Physically, pain continues long after the lost limb heals. And Ricci could develop arthritis in other parts of his body, because he will overcompensate for his lost leg. Amputees such as Ricci must pay more attention to skin hygiene and keep their weight steady. People who lose limbs can gain weight because they burn less calories, Friedly said.

Gaining weight is a problem because a prosthetic is calibrated for a certain size, Friedly said.

For Ricci, books and music were the things that have helped him deal with the loss.

When he came back to Seattle, he also found that telling his story helped him. He began making connections with strangers, he said. The first was a burn patient at Harborview who shared a room with him.

"He said he wanted to change his life after hearing my story," Ricci said.

While Ricci felt alone, the truth was that he was in the minds of many people who wanted to help him and his family.

Fundraisers have helped pay medical costs. While Ricci was in the hospital, people from Hope Foursquare Church of Snohomish, a different church than the one Ricci attended when he was a kid, came to his home to build a wheelchair ramp.

Among his current congregation at the Mill Creek Foursquare Church in Lynnwood, Ricci is known for his work as a counselor, someone who loves other people more than himself, said Phil Manginelli, student ministry pastor for the church.

When the congregation found out about the accident, they organized nights of prayer, he said.

Manginelli said that the first time, 80 people gathered to pray for Ricci's well being.

Ricci could become a different man because of what he is going through, Manginelli said. He believes Ricci will still be a man who wants to make a difference.

"A new person will emerge," Manginelli said. "At the core, it would be the same David."

At home, Ricci has had good and bad days. At first, he took medication nine times a day, but that's been reduced to five. When he was taking antibiotics, the medication made

him throw up.

He also had to go through a painful procedure to care for the wounded stump two times a day for more than two months. His body arched from the pain. He screamed every time.

"We had to make my brother go outside. It was very traumatic," Ricci said. "My step-dad was in tears."

He has had trouble sleeping since the accident. Ricci suffers phantom limb pains, as if he still has his right leg, a complaint common among amputees. To help with the pain, he has made a habit of punching his left knee.

He fights depression by playing guitar, going out with close friends and praying.

"When I talk to God, I feel better, like everything is going to be fine," he said.

"I am so happy to be alive. I forget sometimes what a blessing it is to still be here."

Sometimes Ricci needs help remembering this.

At the beginning, he didn't want to leave home. When he started going out, it was for a short time. He got tired and felt pain.

In his saddest days, Ricci said, friends help him recover. One of them was Zach Skolrud, a friend of six years.

There were times Ricci pushed people away. He even lashed out at Skolrud.

"It was the pain," said Skolrud, 19. "He was getting frustrated."

While the family has insurance, they must pay uncovered costs. For their trip to India to bring Ricci home, the family spent \$15,000, which included medical expenses. The family expects to pay about \$10,000 for the prosthetic.

The family has high hopes for that prosthetic, Perron said.

Just talking about his appointment for a fitting made Ricci clap and throw his hands into the air.

The problem is that he's fighting an infection from a super bug, a germ that is resistant to antibiotics. The germ came from India and it is something not seen in the United States. It is dormant at the moment, but if the germ spreads to the bone, he'll need more surgeries, which means more bone could be cut.

In general, rehabilitation could take from a year to a year and a half.

Before the accident, Ricci studied psychology and theology part-time at Everett Community College.

He won't return to school this fall. He plans to be in therapy three times a week. In February, he plans to go to Montana and volunteer again with Youth With A Mission.

After that, he is not sure what he will do.

"I can do anything. I don't feel limited. I can still play music and teach," Ricci said.

He may not be able to do all the things he did before, like climbing trees, running or swimming.

At least not yet. He and his family live with questions about how close to normal life will be.

On a Sunday afternoon, his mother looks at some of Ricci's Facebook pictures before he went to India.

She pauses at a picture taken in Montana. In the picture, Ricci and other Youth With A

Mission volunteers are at a dock, jumping into the air, with a lake and mountain as a backdrop.

"He might never do that again," Perron said.

It's at Cornerstone Prosthetic in Everett. Ricci and his family bring their cameras and their hopes.

Ricci does not disappoint.

He is given a plastic and titanium prosthetic called C-Leg. It has two microprocessors on the foot and knee to allow Ricci to have a more active lifestyle.

Ricci expects to keep this prosthetic for a couple of months to practice, until a more permanent prosthetic can be adjusted for him.

After putting it on, Ricci walks several feet using parallel bars as support.

"There we go," he says after finishing his first walk.

It isn't painless.

And it is awkward, like putting a knee on a chair and then dragging it around the floor.

Still, Ricci revels in the moment.

"One small step for mankind," Ricci says. "One bigger step for me."

His family -- mother, father, brother and step-dad -- smile. Cheryl Perron tells him she is proud.

This first walking session lasts more than an hour. He walks with the prosthetic at first with the parallel bars, then with two crutches and then one. He even takes a few steps without any support.

Ricci isn't supposed to be doing this at his first appointment. It generally takes between two to three weeks to get to this level, prosthetist Dave Hughes says.

Ricci's youth and motivation are some of his biggest advantages, he says.

"Positive thinking and family support make a big difference," Hughes says.

To help the body adapt to the prosthetic, Hughes recommends Ricci walk an hour in the morning and another in the afternoon. Ricci can gradually increase the time he can use the prosthetic.

At the end, still wearing his prosthetic, Ricci put his pants back on. He grabs the right pant leg and starts unfolding it.

Ever since he came back from India, he had kept the pant leg folded up to his knee.

He puts the pants on. He stands and looks in the mirror.

He is standing without any help.

"Now, it's semi-normal," Ricci says.

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