

My story

Q&A with Konnah

1. You made the film in 2015. Tell us a little bit about what you have been doing since you made the film and what your life is like now.

Brooke and I were in a relationship back then (2015), but we took the next steps and are now married and are proud parents. A few health problems have crept up meaning hospital stays but we have also travelled overseas to Bali and back to New Zealand to the Bay of Plenty to be with family and friends. In fact, we had 2 weddings, one here in Australia and one back in New Zealand where we celebrated with my family who still live on the North Island. Travelling is very difficult, and Brooke must do a lot of physical work to make it happen. I am very grateful and appreciative of the work she does for me because of my quadriplegia.

These days on top of being a proud family man I present my story with PBF giving RAC road safety presentations in schools, events at universities and local councils.

2. Tell us about your spinal cord injury and what that means physically?

I have lost movement to 90% of my body but have only slightly altered feeling on my left leg where I can't feel hot and cold water. When it comes to this (sensation/feeling), I am lucky. Although I have very limited movement from C4 spinal nerve down my sensation all over is very good. Many others with spinal cord injuries, including many of my friends and work colleagues at PBF have what is called complete injuries. This means they have no movement or sensation below their injury level.

In my case, movement of my neck, face and swallowing are all good. I can move my shoulders and use biceps to bend my arms and that is about it. So, I have little bits of wrist movement but no finger movement and this takes away my freedom and independence. Also my lung function is compromised. Day to day this is ok, but coughing is very difficult which is a problem if I get the flu.

Below this point (trunk and legs), I have no movement.

Never walking again has now sunk in. It has been 10 years. This permanency has really hit me. I see my old friends less, in fact not at all now. New friends want me to go to their houses where they have 'all-nighters' and big parties but I have access issues and I need a carer to be with me. So ultimately, I miss out. There are too many restrictions with spinal cord injury and it's difficult for abled bodied people to understand just how limiting life becomes with a traumatic spinal cord injury, particularly with quadriplegia.



Konnah with his wife, Brooke



For the better

3. What would you like people to know about spinal cord injuries and your everyday routine?

Carers need to help me with everyday tasks that abled bodied people (this includes my younger self) take for granted. At times life can be frustrating because of the loss of independence that I live with. This includes simple tasks like getting out of bed, getting dressed, getting something out of the fridge, opening doors, feeding my dogs and so on. If I was to list everything, I'd need the whole page. It has now been 10 years since my crash and the start of living with my physical disability. I am getting used to living with such limitations, I still have bad days and wish I could still do these simple everyday things.

4. In the video, you talk about the feeling of loss of freedom and independence as a result of your spinal cord injury - can you tell us how you feel today?

Still the same really, some days are hard (pain, feeling frustrated) because I am unable to do even simple tasks due to my limited hand functionality and so on. However, on other days, things can be good because I've learnt to really appreciate what I do have. Reflecting back on my old abled bodied life and now my new life living with quadriplegia, I don't take things for granted. I definitely did take everything for granted before my crash.

5. In the video you talk about the night of the crash and that the driver fell asleep at the wheel.

On the night me and friends partied all night. This wasn't the first time but it was the first time that we all piled into my friends small car. There were only 5 seats but there were 7 of us. I was the youngest, so it was decided my spot was in the boot. At first I thought it would be ok but after our first stop (another party) and it was time to leave, I did not want to get back in. My friends did not want me to stay. They wanted the fun to continue and wanted me to be part of it. I remember sitting on the fence next to the car refusing to get back into the boot. I wanted to stay and wait for my mum to pick me up. This group of friends I was with were close. As a group we were 'tight'. We had a real tribal dynamic. We would look out for each other. We all had to be in and never leave anyone behind. They eventually persuaded me to share the front seat with my brother. It was more comfortable, but I didn't have a seatbelt on. By this time it was the next morning. None of us had slept and we had all been drinking, including the driver. Not long into drive some of us started to drift off to sleep, including the driver. We drifted across to the wrong side of the road and collided head onto into another car. I woke up in ICU (hospital) 32 days later. If I stuck to what I really wanted to do and did the right thing and did not get in the car, the crash may have still happened, but I would not have been injured. This is the main point I really learnt from that night, the big influence that peer pressure can have. Peer pressure at times can be a good thing but when mixed with alcohol, cars and other risky behaviours it became something that I still wished I had not done. I regret being influenced by my friends on that day and getting in the car. I could have just waited for my mum.

6. Looking back at the decisions you made on the night of the crash, what advice would you give young people today?

“Don’t grow up too fast.” It might seem cool to do things that adults do when you’re a teenager, but you’ll get to do them anyway when you’re a bit older. Many teenagers may not want to hear this but young people, including myself missed out on so much stuff because we were trying things too early in life (including taking risks in cars) because we wanted to experience everything now. Also, about the power of peer pressure, especially the pressure that can come from your closest friends. In the dynamic of a ‘tight bunch of bros’ like I had, you just want to win their approval and be accepted by them. However, you can be led down a path of bad and risky behaviour. Times when you and they know it’s wrong, but you do it anyway. Back then I never thought that bad consequences would happen to me, but of course they can and did. Some consequences can last a lifetime. Many consequences can be difficult to accept. “I would like young people, to consider these possible consequences before they take that risk. Afterwards it might be too late and afterwards when you live with that lifetime consequence, you may wish that you had of thought about it before you did it.”

I want young people to know that I do not blame my friends. At the end of the conversation, I choose what to do and what my behaviour. Sure, they influenced my decision but perhaps if I was more resilient and thought about my behaviour and the possible consequences beforehand, I may have chosen not to get into the car.

7. Now that you are a father, have you thought about how you will share the story with your son

My son is only 19 months old now and he will never know me out of a wheelchair. He will never see me walk or even being a physical moving father like he will see his friends have (eg playing footy or cricket with, in the backyard). I will of course answer his questions when he has them for me and I hope we have an open and honest relationship as he gets older and naturally starts to take more risks. I’ll have the same advice for him as I do for the students I currently speak with. Eg I would talk to him about how peer group pressure can influence you in negative ways and how even if you know something is not right you might end up doing it and then have live with the negative (and unwanted) consequences because they talked you into doing it. In regard to this, I’ll teach him about self-confidence while as parents we will be positive as parents so he develops self-respect and develops healthy self-esteem. I teach him the importance of having resilience at times when it required. eg If he was in a situation like mine where he must make a choice then I want him to act wisely and make the right and safer one.

I’ll respect his independence and hope he respects me and the wisdom I’ll have to offer. With Brooke and as parents we will insist on ‘behavioural boundaries’ and teach him with consequences when he crosses them. Growing up I had no boundaries and ultimately, I feel that this excessive freedom did eventually lead to this unsafe situation I put myself in and led to this lifetime consequence of quadriplegia I live with. Overall, as a father I want to keep good dialogue with him and I’m willing to learn, compromise and earn his respect so we can keep a positive loving relationship.

8. Can you tell us about some of the positive impacts that the crash and your injuries have had on your life?

Although I wish the crash and my subsequent quadriplegia were not my reality, many positives have happened because of it. Firstly, and most importantly, Brooke came back into my life. I am a father now and that might never have happened. Being spinally injured and having time (this injury has led to a lot of time in bed, alone and lost in many thoughts) to reflect on things have enabled me to develop a real appreciation of my life and what I have and what I can still do. Another positive is my role as a PBF presenter in the RAC road safety program. In the role, I have got the ability to be part of something important and good. It is a very rewarding job.

9. Thank you Konnah for sharing your experiences and your insights. Was there anything else you'd like to share?

I really appreciate the opportunity that both PBF and RAC continue to give me to share my story so I can influence young people in positive ways.



Konnah loves looking after his dogs



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RAC Community Education is committed to delivering road safety education in Western Australia. We have designed programs to keep students safe on the roads by influencing risk reduction, increasing resilience and encouraging responsible behaviour. We deliver free interactive road safety workshops in schools and a youth road trauma awareness event in metropolitan Perth (RAC bstreetsmart) and regional W.A (Project Road Smart).