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Crash snapped his neck, but life in wheelchair doesn't stop BTC grad



Chris Zacharias controls his computer with voice commands and by blowing on a tube at his house north of Bellingham on June 9, 2016. Zacharias, who lost use of his arms and legs after a car crash, will accept his diploma in civil engineering during Bellingham Technical College's commencement ceremony Tuesday, June 21. Philip A. Dwyer pdwyer@bhamherald.com

By Kyle Mittan kmittan@bhamherald.com

Bellingham — Chris Zacharias awoke from a six-day coma in a Nevada hospital in late November 1995.

He has no memory of the crash that sent his pickup tumbling end over end, his tools strewn about, just north of Carson City. The weeks leading up to and following the crash are hazy, pieced together with information from friends and family.

He was told he would never again have use of his arms or legs.

“I thought, ‘I screwed this up so bad I couldn’t even kill myself,’ ” he said. “So that kind of made me laugh.”

Two decades later, Zacharias will roll across the stage to accept a diploma in civil engineering from Bellingham Technical College alongside nearly 300 fellow graduates on Tuesday, June 21.

The ceremony, for him, will culminate eight years of studies to get the degree – and the challenges along the way.

‘You laugh with them’

Zacharias learned to overcome hardships long before the crash 20 years ago.

He was a second-grader growing up in Oak Harbor when he first noticed his hair was falling out. The disease is called [alopecia](#) and can result in a complete loss of body hair.

As an 8-year-old boy with no hair, Zacharias got a lot of strange looks, which led to insults, and eventually fights. A counselor gave Zacharias advice that stuck.

“You can’t beat everybody up that looks at you long,” Zacharias said, recalling the lesson. “When they’re laughing at you, you laugh with them.”

From then on, Zacharias answered the staring with crossed eyes or self-deprecating jokes. The advice, he said, turned him into a lifelong problem-solver, and his wryness shines through today.

After graduating from Oak Harbor High School in 1979, Zacharias did a brief stint at community college before going to work for a general contractor. Roofing work led him to California and eventually to Nevada.

The crash

It was the week before Thanksgiving 1995. Zacharias had just finished a weekend roofing job in Carson City, Nev., and was waiting to get paid.

With the details hazy at best, Zacharias assumes he did what he always would have done back then: He found a seat at a bar and started drinking.

“I’d really tried to knock off my drinking, and would have only a couple beers,” Zacharias said. “Drinking beer was such a big part of my life; I didn’t want to go cold turkey, which is obviously what I should’ve done.”

With payment in hand, Zacharias doubled down on his way out of town and stopped at a liquor store to grab more beer and vodka. He then began the 40-minute drive back to Reno, where he lived.

Authorities estimated Zacharias was going about 60 mph when he veered off the highway. His pickup tumbled end over end. Zacharias was belted in, and the crushed cab came down on his head, snapping his neck.

That no one else was involved in the crash made the recovery a lot easier, Zacharias said.

He spent months in hospitals, eventually moving from the facility in Nevada to University of Washington Medical Center.

Though much of Zacharias' family still lived in Oak Harbor, no facilities there could accommodate his needs. He moved to Christian Health Care Center in Lynden to be close to an aunt in Bellingham. He's been in Whatcom County ever since.

Making a new life

In the years immediately after the crash, Zacharias spent time talking with schoolchildren about the dangers of driving drunk. He also found work answering phones at Home Depot, but health issues associated with hours upon hours spent in a wheelchair meant rounds of treatment that could last for months.

In late 2008, Zacharias was healthy enough to work again, but with the local job market still reeling from the recession, he went to school instead.

He enrolled at BTC and, after completing his preliminary courses, found a home in the school's civil engineering program. His background in construction and roofing, he said, helped him pick the major.

Of course, the new lifestyle came with new challenges.

Zacharias controls his wheelchair entirely with his head. Puffs and sips on a specialized straw tell the chair to move forward and backward, and tilting his head against the headrest turns the chair left and right.

The chair also reclines, which Zacharias does periodically throughout the day to avoid pressure sores.

Another device, called a QuadJoy, allows Zacharias to operate a computer mouse, using the same puffing and sipping gestures to make left and right clicks.

Zacharias uses speech-recognition software to type documents, navigate the web and more through voice commands. BTC staff installed the QuadJoy and software to a computer in BTC's J Building, where civil engineering classes are held.

They also helped Zacharias convert his paper textbooks to an electronic format.

Even with the tools that provided some autonomy, Zacharias often relied on others for simple tasks, like a school-appointed scribe to take his notes, or passers-by to open doors on his way to class when the buttons weren't accessible. He often had to ask students to move to different computers so he could access the one loaded with his speech-recognition software.

“The students were just so kind,” Zacharias said, recalling stories of people who would go far out of their way to come open a door for him. “I was so appreciative of that, and initially kind of surprised. I don’t know if I would’ve done that or known to do that prior to my accident.”

Among the staff Zacharias remembers most fondly is Mary Gerard, BTC’s coordinator of accessibility resources. The department staff helped coordinate Zacharias’ scribes, outfit the computer and convert his textbooks.

Gerard worked directly with Zacharias, from the day he started classes until the day he finished.

“Chris is such an adept person that he showed everyone what he could do and blew away our assumptions about what disability really is,” she said. “It’s difficult to be around Chris and feel sorry for him because he never feels sorry for himself. He has taught me far more than I could ever teach him, for sure.”

During his time at BTC, surgeries and lengthy hospital stays for various health issues often stalled Zacharias’ attendance for months. Some of the civil engineering program’s requirements even changed while he went through it.

But the registrar’s office grandfathered Zacharias through all the changes, allowing him to complete the degree based on the requirements that were in place when he first enrolled.

He finished his final class in December 2015 but will participate in Tuesday’s graduation ceremony.

Looking ahead

Not wanting to live as a quadriplegic has never crossed Zacharias’ mind again. In fact, he’s happier now than he was before the crash, he said. Staying away from drugs and alcohol binges – aside from the occasional glass of high-end scotch or a drink with dinner – has a lot to do with that.

“That’s just a huge weight off my shoulders,” he said.

Since finishing the courses, Zacharias began working with an employment agency. But he’s the first to admit that there may not be a job in the civil engineering industry for a 54-year-old quadriplegic.

That might mean finding work at another home-improvement store selling products over the phone or other computer-based work.

But that doesn’t diminish the eight years of persistence for this lifelong problem-solver.

“There were times when I thought I wouldn’t be able to do it, and I continued to fight and to do the hard work it took. Obviously I had a lot of help, but I was able to do it. I never – especially

after I started – thought I was going to be a civil engineer,” Zacharias said. “But, as most people will tell you, there’s nothing wrong with education.”