



Former roofer shares story of **life** **after fall**

Rick Ponting can't remember the day of the accident. In fact, he now has trouble even remembering simple instructions.

In June 2009, the Simcoe, Ontario, roofer fell off a roof and injured his neck, shoulder, and, most importantly, his brain. Since that accident, Rick has struggled with depression and memory problems. He would like nothing more than to return to work, but with his type of injury, that isn't an option at this time. However, he hopes other workers who hear about his experience will learn from it.

At the time of his accident, Rick had more than eight years of experience in the roofing trade. He enjoyed his work and spent much of his time on the job. One day while he was working on a building in his community, he was perched on top of a scaffold when one of the metal ends popped out of place and the scaffold collapsed.

"And I went with it. That's what they told me," says Rick.

He wasn't wearing any type of fall protection. He had

never had any of the training that is required by the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* for people working at heights, and he had never been made to tie off.

“Nobody ever tied off,” he says.

The only thing Rick remembers about that day is waking up in hospital.

Because of his brain injury, Rick required a kind of surgery called a decompressive craniectomy. His brain was swelling due to the injury. To allow his brain to expand without being damaged further by pressing against his skull, the surgeon temporarily removed a bone flap—in effect, a piece of his skull. It wasn’t until six months later, when there was no more danger of swelling and bleeding, that the piece of bone was replaced.

Rick’s wife, Mandy Waite, remembers his time in the hospital. She says his weight was down to 90 pounds, he had no appetite, and he was listless and depressed. Sometimes he didn’t recognize her and mistook her for a nurse.

Even after he went home, Rick continued to have trouble. “It was a tough time” Mandy says. “He had poor balance and was constantly sleeping.”

Rick also suffered a setback when too much seizure medication in his system caused him to trip and fall again. It’s been a process of trial and error with the medication.

Since his accident, Rick has been working with a team from the Acquired Brain Injury Community Services Department of Hamilton Health Sciences. The team works with him to ensure he receives what he needs, including physiotherapy, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, and time with his family doctor.

“They are awesome,” he says.

Rehabilitation Therapist Christine Brum has helped Rick work out the sequence of events that began with his accident and put him in hospital.

“He has good days and bad,” she says. “We work with him in order to help him regain some independence.”

Rick feels remorseful for how this has affected his family, including his two daughters, aged 5 and 14. “I feel sorry for them. I am not myself,” he says.

His youngest daughter is always cautious now and she asks her father to be careful and not to fall anymore.

“They’ve both had to grow up,” he says.

Mandy says things have changed in their lives in a million tiny ways. Rick walks in his sleep. He can’t remember simple instructions, and sometimes he has to keep a list to remind himself of what he’s doing.

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He uses a day planner and has to write everything down so he won’t forget anything. He also has trouble remembering where he put things.

“I just go day by day,” he says.

Though Rick is working hard to improve his condition, he hopes other workers can avoid the struggle he now lives with by learning what safety features are available to them. In order to prepare for the interview, he worked with Christine to make a list of important things he felt other workers should remember when they go to work. His list includes

- taking safety training
- tying off when it is required
- making sure the worksite is kept tidy and clear of things that a worker could trip over.

Unfortunately, falls such as Rick’s are only too common. Though there has been some improvement, falls from height continue to plague Ontario construction sites. In January (the most recent month for which a report is available), there was one fatality—a worker fell off a ladder while he was replacing an eavestrough on a barn.

The Ministry of Labour knows of seven critical injuries in January, and four of them were falls. This is often the case in many of IHSA’s member sectors.

Rick hopes other workers won’t take their lives for granted. More than anything, he would like to be able to go back to a job similar to what he was doing before his fall. But that’s unlikely. Right now his job is to improve his physical and mental condition as much as he can. With the help of his team and his family, he is working hard to make the most of his life.