October 2013

Survivor of the Legacy Fall

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Survivor
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Falling from Legacy has definitely changed Christian McKee’s life and perspective on life. Rumor had it that he died from the fall, but he’s alive, well and ready to share his story.
“...I should have been from the neck down.”

Cries could be heard around Campustown in Ames at approximately 1:30 a.m. on August 26, 2012 as a body was seen falling 73 feet from a fifth-story ledge at Legacy Towers Apartments. Christian McKee, 19-year-old engineering student, was lying lifeless in the soft dirt at a construction site when EMT’s arrived quickly and well-prepared. “It was a combination of luck that it had rained that day to make the dirt soft, and how fast the EMT’s did their job when they got there that saved my life,” McKee says in a perceptibly grateful manner. McKee was quickly transported to Mercy Medical Center in Des Moines by air ambulance.

Saturday, August 25, 2012, McKee recalls starting to drink in the afternoon with a friend who came up from his hometown of Cedar Rapids. “I was on antidepressants at the time, which you’re not supposed to take while drinking alcohol. Normally, I took them in the morning, but for whatever reason I took it right before I started drinking which ultimately led to me blacking out that night,” McKee recalls. He and his friends then started going around to different parties and drinking more. The last thing McKee remembers is leaving one house party and going to another party at Legacy alone.

According to Officer Huff, two officers from the Ames Police Department were patrolling in their car on Stanton Avenue when they noticed a crowd gathered around Legacy and security guards shining their flashlights around. The officers asked what had happened and the security guards said someone was dangling from a balcony on the south side of Legacy and then fell or jumped—they couldn’t tell. The officers exited their car and went to the scene...
McKee was lying. They quickly called for an ambulance then made the area a crime scene to start investigating.

According to the police report, witnesses saw a man climb over the railing of a balcony and just hanging there looking like he was going to jump. People were yelling up at him telling him to climb back over. No one could tell what exactly happened.

“I get that question a lot,” McKee says, “whether I jumped or fell. It’s very hard for me to say. Yes, I guess you could say I definitely did some sort of [jump]—there’s evidence to prove that. But at the same time, if you do something when you’re completely blackout drunk, yeah you did that but you’re never the same person when you’re blackout drunk. That’s why I hate being asked that question because, well, it depends how much time you want to put in talking about it.”

McKee was in a coma for two weeks. The coma was partially caused by the fall, but it was also medically induced. The injuries he suffered included brain damage, having both ankles shattered from compound fractures which are now rebuilt with metal pins, a broken right arm from a compound fracture—now has two rods in it, a broken neck, a broken L3 and a shattered L4 vertebrae. “The doctors told me that where I broke my neck at, I should have been paralyzed from the neck down. Then you factor in the fact that I broke another vertebrae and completely shattered one—my nerves were all messed up—it’s pretty amazing I have the ability to walk.”

While staying in the hospital for about three months, McKee went through inpatient physical therapy, which was mostly just stretching. By the time he was released from the hospital, he had lost 30 pounds of fat and muscle. He hadn’t regained the ability to walk until two months later. For the next four to five months, McKee did outpatient physical therapy to learn to walk again.

“Physical therapy definitely helped, but learning how to walk again from scratch was the hardest thing to learn how to do again. It was painful and took a lot of dedication,” McKee says. Even to be able to use his crutches, he had to gain his arm strength back. The doctors never said if McKee is going to be able to walk again without canes or braces on his ankles, but he’s not giving up hope. “Your mind gives up before your body does,” McKee quotes. “Being called a cripple is just motivation for me to be able to walk again. I’m never going to stop [trying] until I get there.”

McKee’s roommate at the time, Keil Stangland, had no idea what happened to McKee until the next morning when a cop showed up at his apartment door at 6:00 in the morning. Once the officer told him, Stangland and his friends rushed to the hospital to see McKee—it still wasn’t determined if he was going to survive or not. Stangland continued to visit him almost every day while he was in the two-week coma.

McKee says he could definitely tell who his real friends were after his accident. It was very apparent who was going to be there for him and support him through this tough time and who was freaked out by the whole situation.

McKee and his friends agree that his personality has changed from before the accident. “He’s a lot more angry these days,” Stangland says of his roommate. “We bicker about things we never would have before.” His taste in music has also changed from electronic music to bands who sing with passion and about topics he can relate to such as The Beatles and Red Hot Chili Peppers. Since that life-changing experience, he has made strides toward getting what he really wants out of life.

The things he misses most about not being able to walk are playing soccer, running and exploring new places. He is still able to drive and get where he needs to be, but he appreciates when people help him out with things such as opening doors or offering to carry something. He tries to do most things on his own and to ask for as little help as possible, but it makes his day so much better when people are thoughtful enough to lend a hand.