



Jim McLaren

Appearances can be deceiving. Jim McLaren is living proof. Confined to a high-tech wheelchair, his left leg missing below the knee, McLaren at first glance might seem vulnerable. His condition is the result of two devastating accidents, eight years apart, which reduced him from a collegiate football star and aspiring actor to an amputee and then a quadriplegic. Yet this man, one who doctors predicted would never move below the neck, has nurtured such remarkable inner strength that has and continues to inspire millions. That's Jim McLaren's reality, but only part of the full life Jim ensures himself everyday. This former champion triathlete has much to teach us and reciprocally knows and is grateful for all that is still ahead for him to learn.

"There are times I don't like the way my life went, but that doesn't mean that I'm not in love with life," says the 43-year-old motivational speaker who created the Choose Living Foundation. "Is it fair what's happened to me? No, of course not. So what? I still have to get up in the morning. By engaging life, by moving what few muscles I have, my bed suddenly becomes an exercise mat."

At 14, McLaren found acceptance at Vermont Academy, an exclusive boarding school where "there's nothing to do but play sports and study". Following his passions for sports and performance brought Jim to the next level. His academic success propelled McLaren to an Ivy League education at Yale where he not only excelled in his course studies, but also lacrosse and football. He majored in theater studies while morphing into a 300-pound defensive end for the Bull Dogs.

Finishing his undergraduate work in 1985, he ventured to New York City, to train at the Circle in the Square Theatre School on Broadway. Three weeks later, leaving a late-night rehearsal session on his motorcycle, McLaren was broadsided by a 40,000-pound city bus. Rushed to Bellevue Hospital, he was initially diagnosed as "dead on arrival."

After 18 hours of surgery doctors stabilized a comatose McLaren and made a decision that would shape the next eight years of his life. They amputated his left leg below the knee. He awoke from his coma, rehabbed diligently, and attempted to resume his graduate studies at the Yale School of Drama. There, he started swimming, and picked up a book on triathlons that sparked his imagination. Soon, McLaren was ready to resume life as an athlete, as a triathlete. "I felt like I was back in it, back in life," he says. "I didn't compete against other people. I was competing against me. A buddy once said, 'Mac, nobody cares how fast you go, they just love that you're doing it.'

"I told him I care. I never wanted to be taken for granted, as that guy with the fake leg. So I just kept pushing myself."

McLaren became a media sensation in the fledgling sport of triathlons, paving the way for a new generation of disabled athletes. He competed and set scores of records in some of the

toughest races on the planet, including the New York City Marathon and the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii, and routinely finished ahead of 80 percent of the able-bodied athletes.

Then, on June 6, 1993, his life took another cruel turn. He was in Mission Viejo, California, racing another triathlon. Two miles into the bike leg, on a closed course, a traffic marshal misjudged MacLaren's speed approaching an intersection. The marshal directed a van to cross the street, and the van and MacLaren collided. Hurling into a signpost, MacLaren broke his neck at the C5 vertebrae, paralyzing him.

Slowly, MacLaren pulled himself back together again, grappling with seemingly insurmountable obstacles and even reclaiming some motor function of his limbs. Most importantly, he fostered an inner force that enabled him to act in ways he couldn't as an able-bodied athlete. "It took two years of self study, going deep, and then deeper again," he says. "And, sometime in 2000-2001, I chose life."

MacLaren's Choose Living Foundation, which he launched in 2005, and his ongoing speaking engagements are a distillation of those experiences that have shaped and changed Jim's every day. While it sounds simple, even simplistic, MacLaren doesn't shy from the no-nonsense challenge that such a straightforward moniker entails.

Today, MacLaren considers himself blessed not only because of the enlightenment achieved through his recoveries, his studies and self-exploration, but also because his speaking schedule allows him to impart those lessons. He's grateful for the exposure that came his way when he and Emmanuel Ofori Yeboah received the Arthur Ashe Courage Award at the 2005 ESPY Awards, and the ensuing widespread media attention, including televised appearances with Oprah Winfrey and Jim Rome.

While working as a motivational speaker, Jim refuses to cast himself as a victim and has garnered two masters' degrees, and is currently working toward his Ph. D. in mythology and depth psychology. MacLaren also understands the opportunity he's been given to motivate others, and readily accepts that responsibility, offering his own experience as example.

A friend recently told him of a girl at a high school basketball game in rural Pennsylvania wearing a T-shirt that said: "What would Jim MacLaren do?" The answer is obvious. He'd choose to live life to the fullest, without excuses, without regret. "It's a journey," says MacLaren today, acknowledging the universal truth of his life. "Rather than overcoming adversity, it's a journey about living with adversity."

Speech Topics

- Living An Amazing Life
- Living Heroically
- Changing Challenges Into Gifts
- Perceiving Challenges As Gifts
- The Gifts In Everyday Challenges
- Planning On Prosperity
- Overcoming Fear
- Changing Fears And Challenges Into Opportunity