



Miracle worker

Paul Mackenzie meets an inspirational fundraiser who has stared death in the face

Pictures by
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Above: Paramedics Nick Mayfield and Duncan Robertson with ex-patient and NWAA Fundraiser Paul Kelly

Right: The North West Air Ambulance at Blackpool Airport

PAUL Kelly has cycled the length of Ireland, completed fun runs and organised fundraising cricket matches. His exploits have raised thousands of pounds and now he is planning to leap from an aeroplane to keep a lifesaving Lancashire charity in the air. He doesn't do it because he is a daredevil, or because he feels he is indestructible; quite the opposite. Paul has devoted himself to fundraising because he knows the importance of the services he supports. Without them he would be dead.

Now 49, the father of two was dubbed the 'Miracle Man' by the

press after he survived an horrific accident at work which severed his left leg, left hand and the fingers of his right hand. He owes his survival to a series of lucky coincidences, his determination and the support of his friends and family. But his biggest debt is to the fire crews, paramedics and surgeons who battled to save his life.

He was working alone at his tile factory in Whittle-le-Woods, near Chorley in February 2002 after his two employees called in sick when he made the near fatal decision not to replace a temporary guard above a huge industrial blender.

'I was there on my own and as ever when you are working alone, the phone never stopped ringing and there was so much that needed doing,' he said. 'We were nearing the end of a process of installing guards around all the machines and there was only one which didn't have a permanent guard. Because I was on my own I decided just to put some cardboard over the hole because there was no-one there to get hurt.'

'I was going to the office but the phone rang again; I ran back to answer it but I had created my own mantrap, I stepped on the cardboard and fell straight into the blender.'

The two ton machine was mixing wall grout and the massive blades ripped through his body, but he added: 'The blades start mixing from the outside and work in so if I had been dragged into the machinery I think my injuries would have been far more serious. I fell straight into the middle of the machine and I think that helped save my life.'

'In the time I was in the machine I accepted that I was going to die. I was ready to move on. I had reached a beautiful tranquil state, it was the most wonderful feeling I have ever had. And then the blades stopped. I didn't know why. I didn't know it then but the machine had blown a fuse. I must only have been in there about 20 seconds, I remember the blades turning six or seven times. As soon as the blades stopped I was





Left: Paul Kelly and the North West Air Ambulance

straight back to survival mode.

'It was miraculous. I realised very quickly I had severe injuries. My left hand was completely severed and I had lost the fingers on my right hand but I thought I would sort that out later. I didn't know my leg was partly severed below the knee and was holding me in place. I thought "wow, I have a chance" but I knew I would have to be very lucky to survive.'

By chance a delivery driver had just pulled up and he heard Paul's

shouts, dialled 999 and stayed with him until the emergency services arrived minutes later.

'I was feeling really, really good. I refused painkillers because there was no pain,' Paul said. 'The fire crews worked for 50 minutes to get me out, then they put me on a stretcher and carried me to the Air Ambulance. I remember thinking: "Boy, I am being spoiled," I didn't consider it at the time, I thought it was all just a part of the NHS.

'I lost consciousness and woke up at hospital in Preston. I had had a blood transfusion but I had a big smile on my face. I knew I was going to beat it. I went back in the helicopter to travel to Wythenshawe where they have one of the top plastic surgery units in Europe. I lost consciousness again and when I woke up I was in intensive care.

'I had had two lots of operations, the first was 12 hours, the second 10 hours. So I had 22 hours of surgery in a 28 hour spell. Since then I have had 25 more hours of surgery and had about 50 units of blood.

'Surgeons grafted skin from the foot I lost to my knee, my big toe is now my right thumb and they used tendons, muscles and blood vessels as well. I was in hospital seven weeks and I was walking on the ward. I got my new leg in July and was driving in November. It was wonderful to get out of my wheelchair and I felt so good to be alive.'

Since his accident Paul has wanted to live as normal a life as possible. He refused to convert his home in Leyland because he was determined not to be in a wheelchair for long.

'I have never had a depressive thought and I recognise that I have been very, very lucky to have no pain and no trauma. I haven't

Below: Assistant Charity Chief Executive for the North West Air Ambulance Jackie Northover and Paul Kelly



'I don't see my disability as a negative thing, I think it has enriched my life and now I am helping other people'

suffered financially either, because I was able to get back involved in the business within a week of the accident. I have had as good a rehabilitation as anyone could have had.

'I have never thought "Why me?" because why not me? It was my fault and caused by my stupidity in not replacing the guard. I would rather this happened to me than someone it would affect more. Too often people want to find someone else to blame but it was my fault, the buck stops with me.

'I have no regrets about anything. I don't want to turn the clock back. I see what happened as a pro-active thing and believe that everything happens for a reason. I don't see my disability as a negative thing. I think it has enriched my life and now I am helping other people with fundraising and I talk to amputees on the ward and do work for the Healing Foundation, Blood Service and Air Ambulance. They are all heroes, there is no word to describe the giving of life to somebody and I get an amazing buzz working in that environment.'



Sky-high lifesavers

IT took two minutes for the North West Air Ambulance to take Paul from his factory at Whittle-le-Woods to hospital in Preston and during the short flight paramedics gave him emergency treatment. For Paul it was a lifesaver, for the air ambulance crew it was another working day.

Paul's story is horrific and distressing but it is not unusual for staff on board the bright yellow helicopter. Since it was launched in 1999 the aircraft has attended an average of four accidents a day. Hundreds of people across the North West owe their lives to the service and yet it receives no official funding to meet the £75,000 it costs to maintain every month.

'The rescue mission had a massive impact on my life,' Paul said. 'I wouldn't be alive today and I'm so glad the North West Air Ambulance was available. It is very important that the service is available to other people who have accidents. You never know who is going to be next.'

The North West Air Ambulance is the only medical air emergency service in the region, covering 5,500 square miles and serving a residential population of seven million. It is based at Blackpool Airport, is airborne within two minutes of a 999 call and can be at all manner of accidents and incidents anywhere in the county within minutes, with the ability to land in areas ordinary ambulances would struggle to reach. The helicopter has a maximum flying time of ten minutes to the nearest hospital anywhere in the region and in the event of serious accidents or illness, it is this speed with which medical care can be delivered that is crucial. It is recognised that by receiving treatment at the scene and arriving at the hospital within the 'Golden Hour', the patient's chances of survival and speed of recovery are dramatically improved.

Lynda Brislin, chief executive of the North West Air Ambulance said: 'From the time the patient is injured, the clock starts ticking and the treatment given in that first hour not only improves their chance of survival but also increases the chance of them making a full recovery.'

The current German Bolkow helicopter is 30 years old and will be withdrawn from service in 2009. The plan is to replace it with a brand new state-of-the-art EC 135 helicopter in December which will provide a faster and more efficient service. The new aircraft was paid for with a £500,000 legacy from the estate of the late Katie Caine from Thornton Cleveleys and will be called Katie in her memory.

• The NWAA costs £75,000 every month to maintain and relies totally on donations to keep the service running seven days a week, 365 days a year. Call the donations line: 0800 587 4570.