

# Old high-school teacher, friend get injured worker back rolling Centennial class restores wheels for man who nearly died

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Photograph by: Sam Leung, The Province



Andrew Mitrocsak drives his rebuilt '93 Mustang away from Coquitlam Centennial Secondary School automotive shop Monday. Mitrocsak was disabled after a workplace fall that nearly killed him.

Andrew Mitrocsak is a man reborn. Two years ago, a step he took into a hole in a warehouse roof should, according to the laws of physics and the fragility of the human body, have been his last.

And before he hit the ground, Mitrocsak prepared to die.

He'd plunged through the sheet-metal roof, and there was nothing between him and the concrete floor, 10 metres below. Amazingly, he survived, but with injuries that would make many people wish they were dead.

It was nearly 15 minutes before another worker found Mitrocsak bleeding out on to the floor of the warehouse under construction in Langley.

His pelvis was shattered. One arm was broken in three places, with the bones sticking out of his skin. His liver was split open, his kidney cut, and his spleen damaged beyond repair.

It's been two years since the March 2007 fall, and his recovery has been filled with pain and difficulty. Scars run along his right arm where the shattered bones tore through his flesh. A surgical scar bisects his belly from chest to waist.

He suffers from post-traumatic stress, and is receiving counselling to help him cope with the anguish of the accident and its aftermath.

WorkSafe BC has not yet completed processing his claim, and the once gainfully employed young man now makes ends meet with disability assistance from the government.

Getting his beloved hot-rod Mustang back on the road, he figured, would mark a major step forward -- it just needed some engine work, some parts installed, and a brake job.

But, with limited funds, and disabilities that still prevent him from bending over, he wouldn't be able to do the job himself. So he made contact with his old auto-shop teacher, Geoff McElgunn at Centennial Secondary in Coquitlam, and asked if the students there might be able to make his car part of their education. When the '93 Mustang came in, it became apparent it needed more work than Mitrocsak had expected.

McElgunn decided to give his former student, now 23, a surprise.

"He's had a terrible setback, and I thought he could use a boost," McElgunn says.

Yesterday, when Mitrocsak showed up to retrieve his Mustang, he found it completely restored, with an immaculate, new, blue paint job.

A former student contacted by McElgunn, James Davies at Morita Autobody in New Westminster, had jumped at the chance to provide free body work and a paint job for Mitrocsak's car.

"I've never really had anything given to me," says Mitrocsak, the son of a single mother, "especially something of this magnitude. I've never had to express this much gratitude. You just can say 'thank you' so many times. I just feel sort of euphoric."

Mitrocsak has regained his 225 pounds after falling to 155 in hospital, but his days of kickboxing and snowboarding are over forever, he says.

"I lost quite a lot of sports," he says, preparing to take the car for a spin. "But at least I'm not in a wheelchair."

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