



Northeast Center for Special Care

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Derek K.

From New York's Bravest to Living Independently - A True Fighter

Imagine being a young-strapping New York City Firefighter. You have braved high-rise fires and all kinds of danger. Now imagine in a moment all of that is taken away from you. That scenario is exactly what happened to the man you are about to meet. Derek K., was one of New York's bravest he fought fires and has continued his fight from a traumatic brain injury and spinal cord injury to living independently. Meet Derek:

I was a New York City Firefighter. I was born in Queens, New York. I grew up in Flushing. After high school my parents moved to Florida and I got the boot so I went to work. I decided that I wanted to become a firefighter. It took me seven years to get in. I was a firefighter for five years. I was on rotation and my last company was Engine 8 in mid-town Manhattan. We responded to high-rise fires and class-threes' that had to be investigated. If fire doors were opened we had to look and see what is wrong. It was a very busy company.

Half my company - Engine 8, Ladder 2, died in the twin towers on 9/11. People say I'm lucky to be in my condition because my accident happened before that it could have been me in at the World Trade Center. God bless the New York City Fire Department they helped me and stayed on my back so I wouldn't give up.



Derek K., New York City Firefighter who experienced a brain injury and a spinal cord injury in an accident.

Derek told us what happened on the night he was injured.

On December 4, 2000, I was crossing Queens Boulevard and a guy was speeding and bombed a red-light and hit me. I was thrown into the air by the force of the hit I had no chance - if you don't time it right (crossing Queens Boulevard) you have no chance. I got a brain injury from that. I used to be two hundred and seventy five to two hundred and eighty five pounds; my arm measured twenty-three inches. I worked out at a gym in Bayside and I contribute being in shape to being able to survive my accident. It's interesting there wasn't a broken bone in my body but my spinal cord was severed and I'm paralyzed from the chest-down.

On Queens Boulevard so many people died over the years before my accident; because of being hit by cars. The City decided to put in cross walks, lights and barriers after the fact. I believe it was because I was in the news after I was hit that they finally decided to do something about it after that.

Derek K., and John Szalkowski, RRT, Respiratory Therapist.



It was the beginning of a tough journey for Derek from hospital to nursing home and finally to Northeast Center for Special Care.

When I was hit I went into a coma for several months. When I woke up from it I was on a ventilator and I had a trach and g-tube. I had nothing in my mouth for three years. My mom was there when I woke up - she means a lot to me. The doctors in the hospital said I would never eat again and I said baloney!

When I left the hospital I went to a nursing home. They couldn't do nothing for me so my mom found Northeast Center and found out there was an opening and we took it.

I literally left the nursing home I was then in the next day and came here. Northeast Center has done wonders. My first month here they were able to take the trach out. Then my g-tube came out. I took a test and I have a swallowing disorder but I learned how to eat. I make a little regurgitation noise when I eat but I can't help that, I'd rather eat than not eat. I started eating chopped foods and I'm on thickened liquids because of my swallowing - this place had done wonders for me.

I learned how to be independent here again and I've changed. It's funny after my accident I turned from being a slob to being a neat freak, I keep my room immaculate. I find now I'm kind of impatient but I've been working on that. I did have a lot of anger at first after the accident, but I've changed - I think I'm a nice guy now.



Derek K., Carolyn Poccoroba, CNA, and John Pease, CNA.

While he worked at rehabilitation, the community reentry department at Northeast Center for Special Care was hard at work setting up community supports. Derek told us of his plans after discharge.

Northeast Center helped me get the TBI Waiver and they are going to help me with supports I need. My brother lives in upstate New York and I am going to relocate there. I went up to visit my brother and I saw a nice little community that I liked. I have aides who come in the morning and then at night to help me and I am getting a counselor and someone to help me exercise. I'll have someone to help me cook and to take me to the gym. My brother being so close is also a help. I have a single bedroom apartment with wide doors for my wheelchair.

When I get to my new apartment I'm going to chill for a while - I want to get my life back, and get a daily routine. My dream is to do some volunteering; I want to help other people by telling them about my experience and let them know what I've learned so that they have hope. If I could give someone who is going through what I have gone through I would tell them to do as much for themselves as they can. I can shave myself; brush my teeth by myself - try to do whatever you can do for yourself.

If you fail then you ask for help.

Someday I want to go back and work with the fire department, maybe a job using computers - I'd like to pay the New York City Fire Department back for all the help and support they gave me.

Derek K., graduated from the Northeast Center program and has returned to the community. He lives independently in an apartment with supports.



Finally we asked Derek what it was like being at Northeast Center for Special Care.

There are a lot of good people that have helped me at Northeast Center. Jean and Laura, my occupational therapists have been great and so has Pam, a restorative aide who works with me on the standing table everyday. I learned a lot of little tricks here - they showed me how to blow my nose, I learned how to do pressure relief - lifting myself up from the wheelchair every fifteen minutes; I learned how to transfer using a board.

This place has really helped me they taught me how to do things for myself. I want to come back to visit.

Derek has successfully reentered the community and is living in his apartment. He left Northeast Center for Special Care with a fighting determination to live independently using the skills he learned here.

At Northeast Center we also fight for our Resident-Neighbors with brain injury and spinal cord injury to be able to live as independently as possible in the most integrated setting. Our [mission](#) drives our philosophy and treatment programs. Our successful outcomes of assisting people to return to the community are recognized worldwide.

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