

## John Higgins' story

It seems like John Higgins can't remember a time when he could walk for five minutes without constant pain. When his back wasn't filled with metal rods and screws. Or when he didn't realize the importance of workplace safety.



Only three months into his first job at a local recycling plant in Delta, he had an accident that would change his life forever. For two months, he'd been assigned to operate a forklift without instruction or supervision, and unfortunately, without any safety training.

"I was thrilled to be driving the forklift," says John, now 18. "I hadn't been trained at all, and I didn't learn until after my accident that you should have months of training before you go near one."

While there were times that the workplace didn't seem safe, John says – machines not receiving proper maintenance, people experiencing strain injuries, a danger of falling objects – it never occurred to him to challenge his employers to improve the workplace.

"It was my first job, I was getting paid quite well for my age, and I was greedy and didn't want to get on the wrong side of my boss," explains John.

On September 27, 1998, John had been called into work on a Sunday afternoon, ironically, to paint some of the equipment yellow for safety. He had used the forklift to raise a weigh scale and paint the lower portion.

He noticed there wasn't enough room between the forklift and other machines in the room to allow people to pass. Intending to guide the lift easily out of the way, he put it in reverse. As the forklift began steering towards another machine, he ran behind the lift to try and hop in. He didn't notice the pool of hydraulic fluid on the floor.

"I fell on my face in the path of the forklift, and rolled onto my back," John recalls. "Then, everything went in slow motion. I felt the rear of the forklift pressing against my side. It crushed my left kidney and slowly forced me onto my other side. I was really scared; I knew I had broken my back."

After seven hours of surgery and a three-day coma, John woke up with very little chance of walking again. His back was broken and he'd lost a kidney. While his friends were playing basketball and going to school, John faced months of difficult and painful rehabilitation. The dream of returning to school and graduating with the class kept him going. Catching up on missed courses wasn't the only challenge he faced back in high school.

"If I hadn't had my accident, I would have had a good chance of making the senior basketball team; that was something I really wanted," says John. "My first day back at school in my wheelchair, when I looked into the gym and saw all the guys shooting baskets, that was a hard time for me."

Through great determination and a decision not to wallow in self pity, John graduated from a wheelchair to crutches, to walking for brief periods of time. He also pushed himself in his studies, and will graduate with his friends this year.

The future's looking bright for John, with an acceptance into UBC for mechanical engineering, and the dream of a career in the auto industry. It's a future that could have vanished in a heartbeat, and he urges other young workers to protect their futures by staying safe now.

While employers have a responsibility to provide proper training in workplace procedures and safety, and to maintain a safe work environment, John believes young workers also need to protect themselves with education and awareness.

"Find out everything you need to know about the safety of what you're doing, and don't take anything for granted," John advises. "Think about everything you've got to lose."