



**Life Support**—Dr. Andrew Baker and his trauma team helped to bring Anthony back.



JULY 2002

# The Courage to Come Back

A young man's life is transformed by tragedy, despair—then hope

By KATHY COOK

**A**NTHONY AQUAN-ASSE, 28, raced down the stairs of his girlfriend's house and into the kitchen. "I'm late," he said, strapping on his helmet. "I have to go." Brenda Kenny, 31, stood at the stove, making eggs for him and her three kids. "See you tonight, hon," Anthony said as he grabbed his school books. It was September 23, 1997. Just that weekend, after a year of dating, he and Brenda had got engaged.

Traffic was heavy as Anthony rode his motorcycle through Toronto's streets on his way to coach the senior boys' football team at Fern Avenue Public School.

PHOTOS: © RICHARD PIERRE



A handsome, brawny man of 185 pounds on a five-foot-eight frame, Anthony seemed to have been searching for happiness for a long time. To find himself, he had veered into a life of helping others, from autistic kids to prisoners.

Now, following the path of his parents, he'd become a Grade 8 special-education teacher. And Brenda, struggling to raise three children, needed him. That made him feel good.

Anthony mulled over game strategies as he drove through a busy intersection. Suddenly, an oncoming car made a left turn in front of him. Anthony applied his brakes and tried to lay his bike on its side to avoid a collision. But his bike slammed into the passenger side of the car.

Anthony lay crumpled on the ground. Bones throughout his body were broken, and blood oozed from his mouth and ears. Soon his heart stopped beating. When ambulance attendants arrived, they began CPR.

**S**HORTLY after 9 a.m., Anthony's mother, Josephine, was called out of her Grade 2 classroom to answer an urgent call in the staff room. The police officer on the line had found her number in Anthony's wallet. "I'm sorry to inform you that your son has been in a serious accident."

"Is he going to be okay?" she asked.

"I think you should have someone drive you to the hospital," a colleague suggested.

At St. Michael's Hospital, anxious hours passed as Josephine and her husband, Kenneth, waited outside the intensive-care unit. Finally, in the early evening, a nurse took them to see their comatose son.

Anthony's head and body were so grotesquely swollen that his family had trouble recognizing him. A shunt in his skull was draining fluid and blood from his brain. To stem internal bleeding, doctors had removed his spleen and sewn up rips in his intestines. His ribs were broken, both lungs had collapsed, and he had a torn aorta. X-rays showed that his skull was shattered.

Josephine ran her hand over his hair. "Anthony, this is Mom," she whispered. "I'll never leave you."

IN THE MORNING, a team of specialists met at Anthony's bedside. He didn't respond to pain, light or sound, and tests showed minimal brain activity. They offered little hope.

For days Anthony clung to life, his parents and Brenda always nearby. A week after the accident, Brenda and Anthony's older sister, Jasmine, sat with Josephine as she met with the doctors. "Tests show there's little measurable brain activity...I'm sorry, the son you knew is gone. There seems little point to life support."

Josephine felt numb. "I'm not ready to make a decision like that,"

she said. "I know Anthony is still there."

The next morning, Kenneth drove to the hospital alone. His wife, who always looked on the bright side, would never admit that Anthony was gone. He would try to decide for himself.

At his son's bedside, Kenneth looked down at Anthony, filled with

A doctor in the unit noticed the interaction and grabbed Anthony by the arms. "Open your eyes!" he yelled. Anthony's eyes fluttered but remained closed. Another doctor pulled open an eyelid and shone a flashlight at the pupil. It constricted. "He's here!" he said. Something in Anthony's brain was starting to respond.



**"Anthony, this is Mom," Josephine whispered. "I'll never leave you."**

tubes and wires, and wondered: *Do you really want us to let you go?* Suddenly he became angry. He didn't want to lose his child. "Anthony!" he shouted. "Show me you're there!"

Kenneth's heart jumped as he saw the toes on Anthony's right foot clench. *Could it be a reflex?*

"Do it again!" This time Anthony wiggled his toes. "That's my boy," Kenneth said, clutching his son's hand. Anthony squeezed back.

Over the next few weeks, Anthony slowly came back to consciousness. One afternoon Dr. Andrew Baker, chief of the trauma unit, stopped by his bed. "Anthony, can you give me a thumbs-up?" he said.

Anthony looked at him and raised his thumb. *Maybe we're going to be lucky here*, Baker thought. Still, Anthony's brain had gone without oxygen and had several rips in it. He would probably spend



the rest of his life in an institution.

In mid-October, desperate to know what Anthony could understand, Josephine arrived in the ward with a computerized spell checker that had a keyboard and a small screen. Anthony's brain injuries had left him barely able to hold a pen, and the life-support tube down his throat kept him from talking. She undid the straps holding his arms to the bedside. "I thought you might want to say something," she said, offering him the device.

"Help me, Mom," he typed.

Josephine felt helpless but also

membering. He cried easily and was given to sudden bursts of anger.

**I**N EARLY December Anthony, now a frail 115 pounds, was transferred to the rehabilitation ward of Credit Valley Hospital. With the respirator removed, he was able to relearn the basics of daily living—including walking, reading and speaking—and he regained some control over his moods.

One morning, Josephine met him for coffee in the hospital cafeteria. The doctors had said his brain would

## The neuropsychological tests showed to concentrate and recall

thrilled. "I am helping you," she said. "We'll get through this together." For the rest of the afternoon, she read him hundreds of get-well cards from the students and teachers of his school.

On October 24, attendants wheeled Anthony into the operating room, where heart surgeon Dr. Lee Errett carefully reattached his torn aorta. "Everything went well," Errett told the family after the four-hour surgery.

But neuropsychological tests showed that Anthony's ability to concentrate and recall information was that of a six-year-old. He had problems understanding and re-

keep healing for up to two years, the undamaged parts learning to compensate for the injured sections. This was the time to give him as much help as possible. "Let me help you get better," she said. "Move in with your father and me."

But he had other plans. "Mom, I'm not a child," he said. "I can't act like one."

In January 1998 Anthony moved into a small townhouse with Brenda and her kids. But their continual chatter tortured him. He sat in the living room holding his head, confusing sounds echoing around him. *They're driving me insane*, he thought.

Meanwhile Josephine had returned to her Grade 2 class. One afternoon in March, she invited Anthony to come to school with her. "Class, this is my son Anthony. He's going to help out."

"Hello, Anthony," the seven-year-olds chirped, their faces beaming. Anthony leaned on his cane, feeling brighter. "Nice to meet you," he said. The class sat on the floor around him while he read to them. He stumbled over the odd word, but the children didn't seem to mind.

"Mom, I'm going to be a teacher again," he said as she drove him

Then on a warm summer night in 1998, wanting to believe he had overcome his deficits, Anthony met a group of old friends at a pub. A woman he recognized sat down next to him. "You look great," she said. "What are you up to now?" He couldn't think of anything to say, and before long she changed seats. He felt people looking at him. Their conversations didn't make sense. They think I'm stupid, he thought. I've got to get home.

Anthony spent the rest of the evening crying in his room, a cloud of depression settling over him. He

## that Anthony's ability information was that of a six-year-old.

home. Josephine didn't know how to respond.

Back at Brenda's house, Anthony sat at the kitchen table, feeling tense. "I wish you wouldn't smoke," he said, unable to restrain himself. He knew Brenda was doing the best she could to help him, but he felt like a child around her. *I need to get strong on my own*, he thought. *This isn't working for either of us*.

Anthony called his parents. "Mom, can you pick me up?" he asked.

He moved back home for the first time since he was 18 years old. He and Brenda both agreed it was best to put off their engagement.

realized he'd never be the same person again. Ashamed, he began making excuses when friends invited him out; he spent lonely days watching television at home.

**O**NE DAY Susan Paquette, a rehabilitation case manager hired by Anthony's insurance agency, dropped by to visit. She saw how despondent he was. "Life may be different from what you've known, but it can be good again," she insisted. Anthony looked at her sadly. "I need to return to teaching," he said. "I'm useless here."



"I don't think you're ready," Paquette said, worried that failure now would devastate him.

"Sue, believe me, I need to try."

*Maybe he'll be able to volunteer in a school setting,* she thought. About six months later, noting Anthony's progress in rehabilitation, she set up a meeting between Anthony, his neuropsychologist and his old principal, Kaye Davies. Davies wanted to help in his rehabilitation any way she could, but she had some concerns. Anthony's neuropsychologist was

reassuring: Inappropriate behaviour was common in head-injury patients, but Anthony seemed to be gaining control of his emotions. "We'll keep a job coach with him at all times to monitor him," Paquette said. Anthony could volunteer at a nearby school.

On a frigid morning in February 1999, Anthony stepped nervously with his job coach into the Keele Street Public School. He was met by Michelle Rodney-Bartalos, a Grade 4 to 6 special-education teacher who

Overcome, he sobbed as he drove home.

He called his mother. "Are you sitting down?" he asked. "I was a teacher today."



The Courage to Come Back

had agreed to take him into her class. She introduced him to the students and had Anthony sit with a small group who needed extra help.

"We don't want him in our group. What's the matter with him?" a student asked.

"Ask him yourself," Rodney-Bartalos said. Embarrassed, Anthony told the kids he had a brain injury and was fighting to get better. They seemed to respect him after that: They, too, had intellectual battles.

Each week, Anthony grew more comfortable teaching. Spring arrived and, feeling stronger, he started jogging and driving again. And he moved into his own apartment. In early June, the principal at Keele stopped him in the hallway. "I'm in a jam," John Powell said. "We need a supply teacher for a Grade 2 class. You have your teaching credentials, right?"

"Sure," Anthony said casually, hiding his excitement. "I can do that for you. No problem." While his job coach sat quietly in the back, Anthony played bingo with the kids, took them to recess and had them read from their books. When the class ended, one child called out: "Bye, Mr. A. I hope you're our teacher again soon."

"I hope so, too," Anthony replied. Overcome, he sobbed as he drove home. He called his mother. "Are you sitting down?" he asked. "I was a supply teacher today."

Josephine beamed. "I'm so proud of you," she said. "I always thought this day would come."

Still, Anthony's intense fear of social interaction trapped him in a life of loneliness. He knew he needed to conquer this, so in June 1999 he called St. Michael's Hospital and registered as a volunteer. Nineteen months after leaving it, he arrived back at the intensive-care unit where it had all started. "Seeing you back here like this has made my day," Dr. Baker said, shaking his hand.

Recognizing the desperation of the people in the waiting room, Anthony was soon spending days offering companionship, small talk and hope, and often telling them his own story of recovery. Through the summer, he became friends with dozens of distraught families, knowing his presence was helping them. He could tell he was healing.

**I**N LATE August, to prepare for the new school year, Anthony met Rodney-Bartalos at Keele Street school, arriving without a job coach. "Hey, Michelle," he said, "let's get the desks arranged."

Rodney-Bartalos couldn't stop looking at him. The way he moved so quickly and made suggestions. "You've come a long way this summer," she said.

Word of Anthony's recovery spread to Faegi Bines, the new principal of Fern Avenue. The school had a special-education teacher re-



tiring in January, and based on recommendations from Keele Street teachers, she asked Anthony if he'd like the job. "Are you kidding? I'd love it!" Anthony said.

In January 2000 Anthony walked into his new classroom of eight kids. "Hi, everyone. I'll be your teacher for the rest of the year."

Determined to be a success, Anthony arrived at school each morning at 7 a.m. to look over his notes. He worked until midnight most days, writing out lesson plans, routinely calling his mother for advice. Still not trusting his memory, he set his Palm Pilot to vibrate when there was a meeting or a test he needed to remember.

**T**HE TERM passed quickly. But through it all, Anthony still felt his life was incomplete. He began browsing on-line dating sites. One evening, up came a picture of an attractive, curly-haired woman who liked the "spiritual side of life." He e-mailed her, telling her about his accident and recovery. Armenian-born Tamara was a human-resources officer who worked part-time as a homeopathic practitioner. She e-mailed back ask-

ing if he had ever tried homeopathic remedies.

At 3 p.m. on November 5, 2000, Anthony met her at a Toronto coffee shop. "Hi, Tamara," he said, grinning. They passed the afternoon chatting. The following weekend Anthony handed her a card and flowers at dinner. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you better," the card said. Over many dinners, they fell in love.

One evening after school, Anthony drove to his parents' home. He sat with Josephine in the kitchen. "Mom, this might sound strange, but I'm happier now than I've ever been," he said. "And it has a lot to do with you. Thanks for believing in me."

*Anthony is now a Grade 8 teacher and a guidance counsellor at Bloorlea Middle School in Toronto. Enrolled in a Master of Education program at the University of Toronto, he still uses aids like a laptop and Palm Pilot to cope with his memory deficits. And he continues to volunteer at St. Michael's Hospital.*

*For more information on recovery from brain injury, contact the Ontario Brain Injury Association at 1-800-263-5404 or visit their web site at [www.obia.on.ca](http://www.obia.on.ca).*



One day my husband and three-year-old daughter went fishing. When they returned, I asked, "Did you guys catch anything?"

My daughter responded with her hands on her hips: "Nah, we just drowned a bunch of worms!"

—Contributed by BECKY MILLIS

ILLUSTRATION: © JAMES MCMULLAN

## Laughter, the Best Medicine®

**N**ORBERT and Albert weren't having any luck fishing. So when they saw a man whose boat was teeming with fish, they asked him his secret.

"Just head up that inlet till the water's fresh," he said.

So they started up the inlet. After a while Norbert said, "Albert, dip that bucket over the side of the boat and taste the water to find out whether it's still salty."

"Yep," Albert said. "It's salty."

A few minutes later Norbert asked him to try it again. "Still salty," Albert replied.

This continued all morning until the pair had made their way up a tiny estuary to a swamp.

"Sheesh," Norbert said dejectedly. "There's almost nowhere else to go, and the water's still salty."

"I know," said Albert, "and the bucket's almost empty."

**"A** STUDY in *The Washington Post* says that women have better verbal skills than men. I want to say to the authors of that study...Duh!"

—CONAN O'BRIEN, "Late Night" (NBC)

**T**HINGS you never want to hear at the tattoo parlour:

"Eagle?" I thought you said 'beagle.'

"Boy, I hate when I get the hiccups."

"Two O's in Bob, right?"

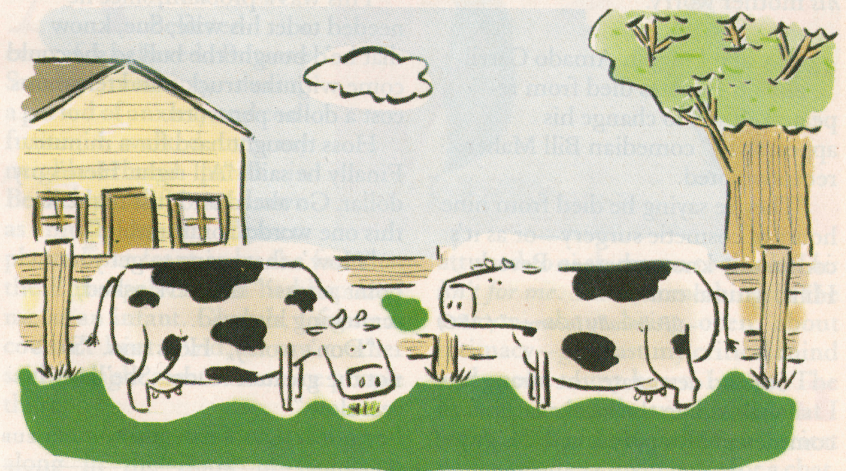


ILLUSTRATION: © MARK ANDERSON

"Man! What I wouldn't do for some croutons!"