



> Road to Recovery

Karen Walsh worked as a team leader with RehabCare's brain injury service in Galway. Karen loved her job and, like any woman in her early twenties, was living life to the full. That all changed in October 2007 when she was involved in a road traffic accident. Karen tells her story of recovery and the challenges she faced along the way.

KAREN DOESN'T REMEMBER anything about that fateful day four years ago, or any details about the accident, which happened just a few kilometres from her apartment. She has been told that she was the front seat passenger in the car, which was involved in a two-car collision. The left-hand side of the car received the main impact, leaving Karen with significant injuries, including a very serious head injury.

Karen was brought from the scene of the accident by ambulance to University College Hospital Galway. From there she was transferred, with a Garda escort, to Beaumont Hospital in Dublin, where she spent ten days in a coma. Although still in a critical condition in a coma, Karen was moved back to Galway. With help from her family, doctors and nurses, Karen slowly regained consciousness. But this was just the beginning of what was to be a slow road to

recovery. Karen said, "For seven weeks I wasn't able to recognise anyone. I couldn't talk or walk. I had to be fed through a tube. I also had a tracheotomy and was catheterised. It was a bad time for me because I was very frustrated and angry."

Gradually, Karen became more alert and began to recognise people. On Christmas Day 2007 she was able to go home for a short period. The trauma of the accident meant Karen



Karen Walsh.

had an absolute fear of getting into a vehicle again and she point-blank refused to get into a car to go home that day. Karen recalls how she felt at the time. "I felt safe in hospital so I didn't want to leave, even for a few hours. When I refused to go home by car, my aunt's husband who drives a mini-bus collected me. I had a wheelchair with me but I didn't use it. I sat in the back with my mum and that made me feel safer. Of course once I got home, then my family couldn't get me to go back to the hospital."

According to the doctors, Karen's recovery was on target and she went for an assessment with the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dublin. "I was accepted there and I spent two intensive months in rehabilitation, where I had to relearn all the basic daily tasks like brushing my teeth, washing my hair, eating, cooking, etc. I wasn't the easiest person to be around at that stage, because I used to get very frustrated. I knew that I used to be able to do these simple everyday things and it was really hard to have someone teaching me how to do them again. I just couldn't understand why I couldn't do them myself. The worst thing was that my sense of direction totally went. I would picture where I wanted to go, but I had no idea how to get there. My mother came to my rehab sessions with me for these two months, simply to help me to get from A to B. I still have a

few problems with direction but it's much better now."

In early May 2008 Karen was transferred to Quest – National Learning Network's brain injury service in Galway. She explains her experience of the service, which she attended for over two and a half years. "Quest helped me in a number of ways. It helped me to regain confidence which was a big thing for me. In practical terms, it helped me with my speech therapy, one-to-one counselling sessions, IT lessons and driving lessons. I also learned return-to-work skills. Quest knew how eager I was to get back driving and so organised driving lessons for me through the Irish Wheelchair Association. After a number of lessons, I finally got the go-ahead to drive in December 2009. That was a massive step in my recovery."

For Karen, who had worked for Rehab for a number of years, it was a case of role reversal as she now began using the service herself. "To be honest, I wasn't very fond of Quest at the start. I looked on Quest as a place where I once had to bring service users through my work and now the tables had turned and I myself was the service user. I was stubborn and I was looking at things

the wrong way. I realise now that I would not have gotten to where I am today without the wonderful love and support from my fabulous family and friends and the rehabilitation at Quest.

"I really missed Quest when I left. Everyone there has a mutual bond. People are there for different reasons, such as brain injuries, strokes, infection, accidents like mine. The Quest gang really is a fantastic bunch and we meet up every few weeks for a catch-up. It's great to have other people who are in a similar situation around you as they understand what you are going through better than most."

Life is getting back on track for Karen. She has found an apartment with a friend but relies on the safety of home at times. She is now back at work with RehabCare in Galway. She says, "I wouldn't be where I am today without the help and support of my parents Paddy and Margaret, my brothers Kevin, Noel and Shane, my friends and my work colleagues in RehabCare and Debenhams." Karen's life changed forever on that fateful day in October 2007, but her future looks bright. In her own words, "whatever is for you, won't pass you". ■



Pictured (left to right): Karen Walsh with her friend Sheila Langan and her mother Margaret Walsh at the Galway People of the Year Awards.