

Photo courtesy: Camera Press



Gill Hicks

ONE YEAR ON

Gill Hicks was on her way to work at the Design Council on the morning of July 7th, 2005. It was just an ordinary day which was about to take a dramatic and life-changing turn. She shares her experiences of the past year with Able magazine, telling us how she has adapted to disability.

In a hurry because she was running late, Gill Hicks crammed herself into the crowded rush hour tube. Minutes later, her life changed forever. Gill had boarded the same train as 19-year-old Germaine Lindsay. During the journey, he detonated an explosive device between King's Cross and Russell Square stations, killing himself and 26 other people, injuring more than 340, and causing devastation 20 metres beneath London's streets.

As chaos ensued, Gill found herself fighting to stay alive; she could see that her lower legs had been almost totally destroyed and she was struggling to breathe. She also realised how close she was to death: "In the carriage I had this sense of 'do I hold on and live or do I close my eyes and die? I don't think I'm going to see my legs again, is life going to be worth living without legs?' Up until that point I never knew an amputee and thought 'what do people do if they don't have legs?' That was quite quickly dismissed because of the survival overdrive that kicks in."

As this survival mode took hold, Gill used the scarf she was wearing that day as a tourniquet on her legs, manoeuvring herself within the decimated carriage to elevate her severely injured limbs. Although dying seemed easy, Gill knew it wasn't an option: "I really felt that the carriage was a horrible place to die and people were going to mourn me and they don't deserve that. I'm such a stubborn little thing and I'm very curious – there's so much I need to do, I wanted to hang on in there to see if I could achieve it all."

Gill was the last person to be brought out of the bomb site alive. After losing 75% of her blood and her heart stopping three times on the way to St Thomas's hospital, she awoke in intensive care to find that both her legs had been amputated below the knee: "I was absolutely distraught," she says. "I asked to see my arms, because you start to go through a process of checking what else is missing. Then I saw my arms and calmed down a bit. But I never ever expected to walk, I guess because I didn't know what was possible." ▶



Photo: Nicky Claire Photography, www.nickyclaire.co.uk

Gill married her partner Joe five months after losing her legs in the July 7th bombings.

After months of rehabilitation, which she is still undergoing, Gill received prosthetic legs and was able to achieve her goal of walking down the aisle to marry her partner Joe in December, five months after she lost her legs. Her determination astounded the press, who were there to report on the big day. Gill also surprised herself: "I never thought I'd be able to walk – but I did. That was overwhelming. I walked down a very important path into another life." She was particularly gratified that the wedding went ahead on the day they had planned and that she didn't have to use a stick to make it down the aisle – she just held onto her brother.

Many of those who helped to save and rebuild Gill's life were invited to the wedding. Some of the ambulance crew assumed she had died after she was brought up from the Tube. Gill is eternally grateful to all the people involved in her rescue: "I run through a list of everyone that was involved with me that morning, I thank them every day and they know that. I'm just thankful that they did manage to get me out with minutes to spare. They know how grateful I am – I owe it to them to lead an exemplary life."

In her quest to make the most of what she calls "life number two," Gill – who was born in Australia – plans to get involved with race relations in the UK. "I have a burning passion and desire to find out how we have created a state where four British Muslims felt they needed to blow themselves up. Surely there's something I can be doing in that arena? The boy that blew himself up on my train was 19; when did he get radicalised? Was he 10, was he 11? That's one thing I'm desperate to really start dedicating my life to. And then of course there's the other, which is being a living breathing example of what it is to be a disabled woman getting on with life and achieving things."

Gill is involved in a number of disability projects and is currently working with Leonard Cheshire, an organisation that she has strong faith in because she believes it stands for independence. Gill soon realised that, as a disabled person, a new world had opened up to her. She learnt about the Motability scheme and other programmes in place to support people with disabilities, and says: "It's like joining a club that you weren't on the waiting list to join. Suddenly the whole world opens up – there are magazines like Able, and there are all these things that make you think it's a whole other world!" She has been inspired to take an active role in campaigning for disability issues, as she recognises that schemes

couldn't believe it, in this day and age. I thought that was all over with, but it's not – it's alive and well. I would be in a shop paying for something, but people would talk to my husband and not me. I'm the person with the money!"

Still working at the Design Council, Gill is grateful that she is based in an open plan office – something she never appreciated until she lost her legs. Her employers have been very accommodating, accepting the fact that Gill is a reformed workaholic: "I've been very upfront about that, saying to them, 'as much as it's brilliant for me to be back, I don't care about it like I used to'. It's a very hard thing for them to hear – that their star performer, who would have everything done by 8.30 the next morning, suddenly says 'you know, this means nothing'. So they've been great." She currently spends two days a week in the office, one day working from home and two days in rehab.

Home is a top floor flat with a bedroom in the loft. It's not ideal, but Gill says: "I'm so adamant that I won't let the house beat me – it's our little place. We do have to move eventually because I'd love to have a family but I can't do that while I'm still crawling up and down staircases – there's a lot of crawling around involved, so you've got to have a sense of humour. My sense of humour's quite black with me being an Australian!"

"On paper I shouldn't be here. I came out rather unscathed – all I've had to do is donate my legs."

like Motability wouldn't exist if it wasn't for people who "paved the way." She now wants to make sure she is helping to pave the way for further developments in the future.

Her acquired impairment has also opened Gill's eyes to disability discrimination: "When I was in a wheelchair people treated me completely differently and I couldn't come to terms with that. I

Some people might find it hard to understand how, after the trauma of the bombing and undergoing all the challenges of the past year, Gill has remained so upbeat. She puts it down to: "The elation of being alive – I thought maybe it would be short-lived but it has carried me through the process of suddenly becoming a disabled person. On paper I shouldn't be here. I came out rather unscathed – all I've had to do is

donate my legs. I've still got so much life that I can live pretty much like I was before. That's fantastic and has really kept me feeling very positive."

Gill is now 38 and planning for the future; she hopes to start a family soon, and is writing a book about her experiences. She intends to make the most of "life number two," and told us: "I really feel that I'm a better person now. I appreciate things so much more than I did then. I've had so many riches given to me since July 7th. Of course I wish I was never there – and I'd love to have my legs back – but I do feel like a better person."

"There's not enough positive things that happen in the world and out of the tragedy I'm hoping to make my life count. It's wonderful to have a life and it's about what you do with that gift. Really, nothing matters – huge accumulation of wealth and all that – because in a breath it can all go. And we never think about that enough." ■



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