

Lucky In An Unlucky Situation – Bourke Street Survivor’s Return-to-Work Journey

On Friday 20 January 2017 Michelle Klobas began her day much like any other. She put her feet on the floor as she started getting ready for the day ahead, not knowing it would be many months before she would again feel the sensation of the surface beneath her.

Michelle was among dozens injured on Bourke Street that day, in a senseless tragedy that killed six bystanders and shook Melbourne and the rest of the nation. As a Principal in Marsh’s Workforce Strategies team in Victoria and a 26-year veteran of the workers compensation insurance industry, Michelle has had extensive experience in managing and consulting in workers compensation across employers, self-insurance schemes and WorkCover agents.

“In the industry, we always talk about how everyone deserves to go home the same way they leave for work,” Michelle says.

“Unfortunately on that day I wasn’t able to do that.”

Michelle can clearly recall heading to work that day. But, in what could be viewed as a small act of grace, the end of the meeting is the point at which Michelle’s memory clouds.

“I remember bits and pieces of packing up, but I don’t remember leaving the building.

“My first memory of the event is waking up lying on the pavement and someone saying ‘don’t worry Michelle, you’re going to be okay’.”



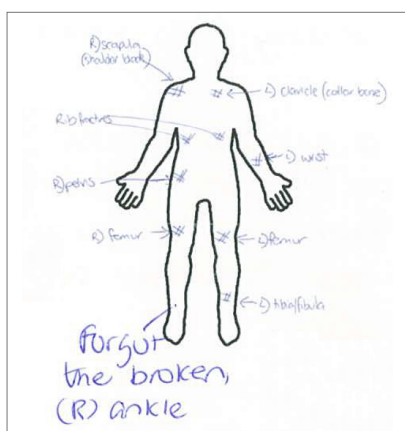
BROKEN BONES

Michelle sustained injuries to her right shoulder blade, left collar bone, ribs, left radius and ulna, right pelvis, both femurs, and the fibula and tibia in both legs. A broken bone in her right ankle was identified later.

“I didn’t know what was going on. I remember going into the ambulance asking one of my colleagues to come with me.

“I wasn’t in pain. In fact, I said to my colleague and the paramedics ‘look, don’t worry, I’ve got WiFi access. If someone can grab my laptop I can do some work tomorrow’.”

Michelle was taken to the Alfred Hospital, where she was able to contact her husband before undergoing an initial six-hour surgery, followed by another operation on Sunday night.



It was several days later when she came to learn the circumstances that had led to her injuries, which became a turning point for Michelle to work on her recovery with single-minded determination.

“I can’t control what’s happened, I can only control what I do with it, and I didn’t want to waste my energies on thinking ‘why has this happened,’” she says.

“If I’m focused on being angry and upset, I can’t get better,” she explains with earnest.



EMPLOYER SUPPORT

Michelle stresses the support from her employer, Marsh, was a critical factor in enabling her to focus fully on recovery, with senior management from the company coming to visit her immediately.

“When you’re recovering from injury, your mind quickly goes back to focusing on your career and work, so when Marsh told me ‘we just want you to get better. Tell us what you need and we’ll be here for you and your family,’ it took away every single worry I had about my return to work and gave me a sense of comfort that I was going to be supported, even though I didn’t know what the recovery journey would be or how long it would take.”

ONE STEP AT A TIME

Michelle spent the next two weeks bedridden at the Alfred Hospital before being transferred to the Epworth Rehabilitation Hospital, where she would focus on recovery over the next three months.

“At that point I was able to feed myself, because I had movement in my right arm, but I wasn’t able to do anything else. If I needed to be moved I remember having four or five nurses coming to the bed,” she recalls.

“Having been such an active person, it was very confronting to deal with my physical limitations. But I knew early on that with my injuries I could recover. While I had broken bones I didn’t have head injuries and I didn’t have spinal injuries. I have always felt that I was lucky in an unlucky situation.”

“If I’m focused on being angry and upset, I can’t get better.”

MICHELLE KLOBAS

WORKFORCE STRATEGIES PRINCIPAL, MARSH

Michelle is also quick to emphasise the importance of her access to treatment, which started immediately upon her admission to Epworth.

“The sense of urgency around treatment was one thing that stood out for me. Sometimes what we see in workers compensation is that there can be delays in access to treatment. With the benefit of personal experience, I know that when you’re not well, one day can seem like eternity.

“The first time I went to physio all I could do was move my toes, but to me that was a significant milestone. When you’ve been unable to move, something as simple as that can give you quite the sense of accomplishment.”

Through the rehabilitation process Michelle progressed from being bed-bound to using an electric wheelchair and on to a walker, as she started the process of relearning how to walk.

“One of the big moments for me was the first time that my foot touched the floor,” she says.

“I remember vividly, sitting on the bed at the Epworth when they said ‘Michelle we’re going to sit you up and put your feet on the floor’. So on the floor they went and I was hit immediately with this sensation of coldness but also a sense of gratitude. It’s something we take for granted, but when you have spent months off your feet, the feeling of solid ground beneath you becomes something you cherish.”

HOME COMING

On 13 April 2017 Michelle was discharged from the hospital and was met with the comfort of familiar surroundings along with a hamper from her employer at home. While her homecoming marked another significant step in her recovery, it also presented new and unexpected challenges.

“We assume that when people are well enough to go home they are going to be fine,” she says as she describes the challenges of trying to make herself a coffee and needing to wait for help to walk upstairs.

“But it’s actually quite confronting to return home in a very different capacity to how you are normally.”

RETURNING TO WORK

Michelle says she was glad to have been given the time to start slow when she decided she was finally ready to return to work.

“It started with a few hours from home each week. When I felt more confident about my ability to handle a fuller schedule, I increased my hours from home before making my first trip into the office.



“Because I’d been in regular contact with my team and managers, and knew what was happening in the business, my first day back at the office had a sense of familiarity despite having been away for so long.

“The constant contact is one of the most important things that can be done to ensure a successful return-to-work. It gives you normality. It is common, in the workers compensation setting, to hear injured workers say, ‘I don’t want to go back. I haven’t even spoken to my supervisor since my injury’. It tells you there’s a feeling of anxiousness, and is a sign that the employee wasn’t sure their workplace wanted them back.

“From that perspective, it’s as much about mental health as the physical recovery.”

“One of the big moments for me was the first time that my foot touched the floor.”

FAMILY SUPPORT

Returning to the scene of an accident can be emotionally difficult for injured workers, and many could benefit from having a family member with them when they go back to the site for the first time, Michelle believes.

“I went with Denis (her husband) the first time I went back to Bourke Street. I was prepared for the experience to be confronting and upsetting, but I knew it was something I had to do to get back to normal,” she says.

Michelle is a strong advocate for injured workers to be accompanied back to work by family and friends where required. “When someone has been injured at work, the first day they’re back they might need support from someone close, because being back at the site of their injury could trigger traumatic memories.”

Michelle’s experience also showed her that the impact on the family of injured workers is something to be mindful of.

“After receiving numerous calls on my first day back, I realised my family also needed to know I was ok. The last time they saw me off to work, I wasn’t able to return home.

“Employers who can accommodate that extra level of support may find that it makes the transition for their returning employee much smoother.”



Michelle resumed her role on a fulltime basis in January 2018. Since returning to work, she has spoken publicly about her experiences, including at Marsh’s 10th annual Workforce Strategies Forum in Sydney and Melbourne, in October 2017.

Marsh Pty Limited (ABN 86 004 651 512, AFSL 238 983) arrange the insurance and is not the insurer.

A global leader in insurance broking and innovative risk management solutions, [Marsh’s](#) 30,000 colleagues advise individual and commercial clients of all sizes in over 130 countries. Marsh is a wholly owned subsidiary of [Marsh & McLennan Companies](#) (NYSE: MMC), the leading global professional services firm in the areas of risk, strategy and people. With annual revenue over US\$13 billion and more than 60,000 colleagues worldwide, MMC helps clients navigate an increasingly dynamic and complex environment through four market-leading firms. In addition to Marsh, MMC is the parent company of [Guy Carpenter](#), which develops advanced risk, reinsurance and capital strategies that help clients grow profitably and pursue emerging opportunities; [Mercer](#), which delivers advice and technology-driven solutions that help organizations meet the health, wealth and career needs of a changing workforce; and [Oliver Wyman](#), a critical strategic, economic and brand advisor to private sector and governmental clients. Follow Marsh on Twitter [@MarshGlobal](#); [LinkedIn](#); [Facebook](#); and [YouTube](#), or subscribe to [BRINK](#). GRAPHICS NO. S18-0097