Champions of Change – When the body fails, what then?

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PART I

From humble beginnings in the cool Alaskan bush, to struggling in Florida’s heat, George’s path eventually led him to Aroostook County – where he now calls home.

George first entered the workforce at 16 years old. He struggled in school, but decades passed before he received a diagnosis for the learning disability that had hindered his reading and writing development. Still, he was a hard worker and learned well with hands-on instruction. When his body was healthy, he used it to earn a respectable wage that supported himself, his wife and their two children. When his body began to fail after decades of hard labor, however, George’s life changed forever.

“When my body collapsed on me, I was pretty much done in,” said George. “I don’t spell so well, but there ain’t a trade that I don’t know – that’s all I know. Without my hands, I’m done in, and my body won’t let me use my hands.”

George never faced hard work he was unwilling to do. Over the years, he worked in various trades, did “tree work,” worked with sled dogs and horses, and drove long-haul truck runs. In his off time, he continued to push his body, living in the rugged Alaskan bush without electricity or running water and chopping wood to heat his home or the water he hauled to his remote location. As tough of a life as it may sound to folks accustomed to modern conveniences, the lifestyle choice suited George just fine. He appreciated the solitude and freedom his bush life provided him, and he was happiest when he was busy and hard at work.

At nearly 50 years old and after more than three decades of pushing his body to its very limits to care for himself and his family, George suddenly faced needing help just to survive. His wife left him. His children, now adults, were pursuing their own lives. With his challenges in reading and writing,
navigating the complex social services system was an overwhelming task. Alone, unable to keep up with his bush property, and fearing his ability to earn an income was nearing an end as his body began to deteriorate, George journeyed as far south as he could fathom, where he could live in a tent if need be without fear of freezing and dying in the Alaskan winter. He went to Florida.

It was in Florida where George began his fight for disability. He had several herniated disks in his back and neck, was in constant pain and receiving steroid injections just to function. His doctors pushed for surgeries, but he needed money to eat and pay for mounting medical and legal bills. So, instead, he pushed himself through excruciating pain to haul garbage, further damaging his already battered body, until the day came that he literally couldn’t anymore. After six years, George finally received his disability, but ironically, it was his mind, more than his body, that earned him the designation. Because of his learning disabilities, coupled with his now physical limitations, the system finally determined he was officially unable to function in the workforce.

“I don’t particularly like it, but there’s nothing I can do about it,” said George. “There was a lot of discussion about how to survive, that’s what it came down to.”

With settlement in hand, George attempted to find a middle ground – something that would remove him from the stifling heat of tent living in Florida and give him some semblance of the life he knew and loved in Alaska. He relocated to Maine and bought himself a small, off-grid cabin nestled in the trees of Woodland. He hoped with continued medical treatment, he might be able to provide for himself with a small garden, but reality – and his body – quickly swept those hopes aside.

In George Part II, George faces some of the misconceptions and fears that people have when someone chooses to live less traditionally in our society. He also is forced to make decisions in order to survive.

[END PART I]

In George Part I, you met George – a man who worked hard his whole life to provide for his family, but whose body eventually put a stop to his ability to sustain that lifestyle. George relocated to Maine in hopes of returning to a life with which he was familiar, homesteading in a remote cabin. But his broken body showed him once again how impossible that dream had become.

Now in Maine, George attempted to connect with services through state resources, but faced the same difficulties he had in other locations when it came to understanding and filling out applications. Reaching out for help turned into more than what George had expected.

“They thought I was some weirdo living in the woods with no heat or electricity and had people come to evaluate me to see if I was competent,” said George. “I’ve lived in the bush for so many years, I’m kind of used to it – that’s the way I lived.”

DHHS referred George to Aroostook County Action Program’s Family Coach Heidi Rackliffe when he was having difficulty figuring out how to use his SafeLink phone. One of the first things Rackliffe did was to connect George with HEAP and ACAP’s CHIP program to get him assistance to survive the cold winter. Through the CHIP program, he received a new chimney, allowing him to safely burn wood. Although he managed to survive the first winter fairly isolated and snow-locked, it was clear that the lifestyle he was struggling to hold onto was not sustainable in his physical condition.
“He was struggling so hard to do it by himself. He physically couldn’t do it anymore,” said Rackliffe, who discussed his options at long length with George and ultimately helped him find housing that required less maintenance, but also meant a drastic change from life in the woods to apartment living.

George now lives in income-based apartments and although he’s grateful for the warmth and security they provide, there are elements of his former life he misses and freedoms he feels he’s sacrificed to gain that security. For instance, having lived alone for nearly 20 years, and worked with many animals, George would like to have a dog as a companion, but that isn’t allowed at the apartments.

“If she wasn’t here to help me, I’d be in the street. When I first came here, I lost a lot of weight. I used to ask Heidi and she’d give me boxes of macaroni and stuff. This last year was the best year I’ve ever had on my body because she got me in there,” said George. “Most of the time, I’m by myself, that’s why I wanted a dog so much.”

Space is also an issue for George, who enjoyed collecting things in case he might need them someday.

“It’s so small, I feel like I’m living in a closet. I’ve been on a 65-acre farm. I started collecting stuff and I had to give it all away. Now I have just the basics of what I need and I still can’t put it anywhere. I can’t have any toys – not that I can afford them, but if I wanted them, I couldn’t have them because there’s nowhere to put them,” said George.

Worst, in George’s opinion, is the idea that those who maintain the apartment complex in which he lives can enter the premise with dogs to do searches for bed bugs – a necessary step in warding off infestations, but an invasion of privacy that, to George, makes him feel like he’s done something wrong.

“If they want to come into your house they need a warrant. If they want to come into my house, they do. I’ve never been convicted of a crime in my life. It made me feel like a criminal, but I have to go with the program or I’m on the street,” he said.

In George Part III, George adjusts to apartment life and, facing the possibility of more medical procedures, starts looking towards building a brighter future for himself.

[END PART II]

In George Part II, George faced some scrutiny from society about his living choices and came to terms with what stabilizing his living situation meant regarding the basic freedoms he was accustomed to enjoying.

What the future holds for George is still uncertain. Doctors are telling him he will need another surgery, but he’s uncertain the benefit will outweigh the costs when he feels like he’s already given up so much in the name of survival.

“I’m going to put surgery off as long as possible,” he said. “Until the doctor says you won’t be able to move until we get in there and fix it, I’m going to put it off. I just hope that I can keep going.”

What he’d like to do is return to the life he knows, but he understands the reality of his situation.

“It kind of scares me that I’m stuck where I am now until my contract expires. I wanted to save my money and see if I could actually get another farm someday – a small little cabin so I can do flowers and gardening. I don’t know if I’ll ever get there on my fixed income. I have no opportunity. You work and
you have opportunity. I only get the joys of what my fixed income allows me to get. Even to have a girlfriend, how does that fit? If you want to take a lady out, then it costs a bit of money. More or less, though, it would be nice to have a friend.”

The fixed income, however, and the help he’s received to stabilize his basic needs, has given him some things that he might not have had otherwise – like a new bed so he no longer needs to sleep on the floor. Still, George maintains a watchful eye over his newfound comforts so that he can live within his limited means and pursue a new quality of life.

“Some of the things make it easy, like turning the water on and taking a bath, but I have to worry about how long of a shower so the bill won’t go too high.”

While George still faces long days confined within his four walls, he does express gratitude and some positive changes have occurred in recent months. For one, George’s doctor validated his need for a dog, and with help from legal services, he recently received approval for a dog, now the trick is finding the right one.

“They have rules and I don’t want an ‘almost’ dog, I want a dog,” he said.

The rules relate to the size of dog, primarily. George is used to mid- to large-sized dogs, and the limit on size is about 30 pounds. While he researches breeds to find his perfect companion within those perimeters, George is looking ahead to future goals.

“I’m doing everything I can possibly do for myself to get out of here,” he said, referring to his apartment. “Don’t get me wrong, this is great. If I were an apartment guy, I’d be in heaven. For somebody else in my situation, it would make them as happy as can be. I’m thankful, but I can’t do what I want to do.”

And what he ultimately wants to do is simply return to a semblance of the life he always has known.

“I’m not looking for a mansion. I’m looking for a little cabin that is heated nicely with a shower and with a little piece of ground where I can put a garden in and walk around, because here I can’t do anything really,” said George.

With his Coach’s help, he’s learning about the resources available and how to help him achieve that next step. Already, his credit score is improving and he’s researching housing programs that may be able to put him into an affordable mortgage when the time is right.

His son and daughter and grandkids still live in Alaska, but northern Maine is home for George now. So, while he learns to make the best of his situation, he has hope and a plan and he feels he can go almost anywhere with that.