



Rick Pildner - A reluctant hero

September 21, 2012, Richard (Rick) Pildner was at the wheel of the City Slicker in Wauseon, Ohio. The nostalgia tractor with the Rolls Royce-style nose had been a regular on the tractor pull circuit 30 years ago. That spring, Rick and his racing partners brought it out of retirement. Powered by a World War II-era Allison aircraft V-12 engine, the tractor is a mean machine, generating upwards of 2500 horsepower – quadruple the power of a high performance Corvette. Unlike a farming-style tractor, the driver’s seat for this kind of modified racing tractor sits in front of the engine – an engine fueled not by gasoline or diesel, but by alcohol.

During a pull that afternoon, the City Slicker’s coolant tank split a seam. The engine caught fire.

So did Rick.

While his five-layer fire suit protected him from the flames that enveloped him, the suit’s material absorbed the coolant. Rick couldn’t get out of the suit in time to keep the scalding liquid from severely burning his legs. He was transported from the scene to a Toledo hospital. Three days later, Rick arrived by ambulance to MetroHealth’s Burn Unit for more aggressive treatment, which included multiple skin grafts on both of his legs.

The first time he was allowed out of his hospital bed, staff offered Rick the chance to attend one of the unit’s survivor meetings. Using a walker, Rick made it down the hall on his own, even though the short trip felt like a 20-mile journey. His tenacity continued. Rick used the time during bandage changes, to lift and bend his legs – biting down on a washcloth to fight through the pain.

Rick went home on a Saturday. The following Monday, the then 57-year-old dressed and made his way to his office at Austinburg Machine, Inc. It had been several weeks since he had checked in on the machine shop in Ashtabula County that he had bought with his father decades before. It felt good to spend a few hours there, working his legs with an exercise band while sitting in his chair.

The commute to MetroHealth for physical therapy was a long one. During a follow-up evaluation, Rick was given the green light to continue doing the exercises on his own. His wife took over changing his bandages. As he continued to heal, his trips back to MetroHealth became less frequent. When he did make the trip, it was to attend support group meetings. Anytime he began to feel frustrated, he’d stave off the negativity by gaining the perspective those meetings provided. He moved from using a walker, to a cane, to walking on his own.

Rick is grateful for the support he has received – both from his family and from MetroHealth. And, despite his successful return to the driver’s seat of the City Slicker, it’s hard for Rick to think of himself as “resilient.” He’s more inclined to use that term to describe the Burn Unit staff.

“I was thrust into this situation. I didn’t have a choice,” he says. “Real resilience is choosing to help the people who are in this much pain ... the children who can’t even make sense of it. That is resilience.”

