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News

'Hall' of an inspiration

Sunday, September 02, 2007

He lost a leg in the Real IRA Omagh bomb but superactive Ali Hall leads an inspirational life. Pauline Reynolds reports

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He's completed a gruelling triathlon in three hours 45 minutes and has a burning ambition to climb Ben Nevis.

He loves to keep active and counts hill walking, cycling and tennis among his hobbies.

Nothing is too great a challenge for Ali Hall - despite having lost part of his right leg in the Omagh bomb.

And he's just returned from a two-week trip to Vietnam to witness for himself how less privileged amputees cope.

Life is good for the 21-year-old university student who has decided to use his disability to his advantage.

He plans to pursue a career in prosthetics and orthotics, having been encouraged by the revolutionary work at Belfast's Musgrave Park hospital centre of excellence.

It was there Ali began his road to rehabilitation.

"When I was younger and getting my limbs fitted, I was always asking questions and became really interested in what was going on," he recalled.

"Then, in lower sixth, I was able to do my work experience in Musgrave Park and got to see the kind of things that went on behind the scenes.

"It was fascinating and I probably wouldn't have chosen this career path if it hadn't been for my injury."

As part of his course at Strathclyde University, he and a group of fellow students visited Vietnam in July.

The war between 1959 and 1975 is believed to have left around 20pc of the population as amputee casualties.

Ali found the experience educational and humbling.

"We visited schools and clinics where a lot of children were born without limbs and with other deformities," he explained.

"Chemicals used during the war have meant that generations of Vietnamese suffer from genetic abnormalities.

"There were landmine victims and also people who had lost limbs through road traffic accidents.

"I was able to relate to the young people over there, but it's sad to see that they're not really integrated back into society.

"Artificial limbs are so expensive that few can afford them.

"I remember a little lad coming up to me in the street to tell me his uncle, who was only about 30, had both his legs blown off in a landmine.

"He said he had never been fitted with artificial limbs and who knows if he ever will.

"I learned a lot about how much money our health service gives to helping amputees and realised how lucky I was to have the medical expertise we have here.

"I was shocked at what I saw."

The lack of progress in treating children with limb deformities was brought home during a visit to one school.

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With the best of intentions, only limited help can be given because of a lack of funding and proper training.

"There were small children with their mothers, who were being taught physiotherapy," he said.

"It was really moving to see so many kiddies, who have to go through so much, being given so little.

"They didn't even cry or complain, although it was a very difficult time for them. Many couldn't walk or get around.

"What a contrast to the amazing progress that has been made here in Northern Ireland."

The trip made a huge impact on Ali.

"Since I've been home I've been thinking more about my experience in Vietnam," he revealed.

"I now feel that when I qualify I'll consider taking my skills to deprived countries which have the greatest need.

"A course - similar to the one I'm studying - has opened up in a school in Hanoi and it's doing a lot of good work.

"There are also outreach programmes for adults and children, but what's really needed is for more qualified people out there."

To help finance the trip Ali and his colleagues embarked on the triathlon (1.5km swim, 40km cycle and 10km run).

He added: "It was pretty tough going, but you can't let anything hold you back.

"There's always a way of getting around any obstacle.

"I'd love to expand my hill walking. Ben Nevis would be a good one to tackle and I should be able to do that in a few years.

"There's nothing to gain by looking back. I've achieved everything I've ever wanted."

A day of devastation

Ali Hall was one of six victims of the Omagh bomb who lost limbs in the blast.

What had begun as a trip out shopping with mum Gwen ended in a day of carnage and destruction.

The no-warning Real IRA explosion in Market Street on August 15, 1998 killed 31 people including unborn twins and left 370 injured.

Ali and Gwen were just yards from the car bomb when it went off.

On the first anniversary of the bomb, Sunday Life caught up with the then 13-year-old and his parents on a holiday in Castlerock.

Already he had nurtured that positive attitude and optimistic outlook he holds true to this day.

"There's no point worrying. No one can turn back time. You just accept it and get on with your life," said the carefree teenager at the time.

Ali told of how he remembered lying on the ground, feeling debris and rubble piled up on top of him.

"I tried to crawl away and then tried to get up, but I couldn't and I knew something was wrong with my leg," he recalled.

"I called for help and a man carried me into Slevins chemist and then I was carried into an ambulance."

He added: "I was frightened, confused and wasn't sure what had happened. "

Ali didn't realise that his right foot had been severed.

Doctors advised that amputation below the knee would give him the greatest chance to rebuild his future.

This exceptional youngster struggled through many gruelling hours of therapy to get his life back to normal.

Recovery was painful and hard to endure, but Ali rarely complained, even when further surgery was needed after his wound became infected.

One of the most difficult obstacles was to learn to walk again with the help of an artificial limb.

But like everything else he's achieved, Ali embraced the challenge with enthusiasm and steely determination.

Nowadays he lives life to the full.

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