

From Inspiration to Frustration

The stories of burn survivors remind us that our prevention efforts are often lacking



By Timothy E. Sendelbach

Dan Caro is an accomplished musician and speaker. On the day I first met him, he was addressing an audience of nearly 800 burn survivors from all walks of life as he presented the keynote address for the 2010 World Burn Congress in Galveston, Texas.

As Dan took the stage, it became evident that this would not be a typical keynote address. Dan was casually dressed (worn-in jeans and a button-down shirt), he carried an open bottle of Diet Coke underneath his arm and the stage he worked from was equipped with a full set of drums. His speech was not filled with colorful words or fancy phrases; it was simply his life story—a story of personal tragedy followed by nearly 30 years of resilience, determination and personal drive. Dan's message was designed to motivate and inspire those in attendance to not give up and to live life to its fullest.

Dan is a burn survivor. At 2 years old, he suffered third-degree burns over 75% of his body when a hot water heater sparked a fire in his family's garage. The resulting fire left him with permanent facial scarring, the loss of both hands and a life filled with what most would assume to be insurmountable challenges.

In a split second, a young child's life and that of his entire family were changed forever. For most, it would have been a time filled with great sadness, self-doubt and personal frustration, but for Dan Caro it became the first step in a lifelong journey that would eventually lead to his dream: becoming a professional drummer.

As I listened to Dan's story, I was amazed at his relentless drive and determination to achieve success. Challenged by the adversities of life that only a burn survivor can understand, he worked day in and day out to accomplish what many of us take for granted—7 years after his first attempt, he was finally able to tie his shoes.

Despite the fact that he had lost both hands, Dan set his sights on becoming a professional musician; at 12, he started exploring options that eventually led him to the drums. After countless surgeries, doctors were able to reconstruct a portion of one of

Dan's hands, providing him with a movable thumb that allowed him to grasp his first drumstick. Trying everything from duct tape to super glue, Dan worked tirelessly to find a way to grasp his second drumstick, eventually settling on a makeshift contraption involving a sweatband and a rubber band.

Through his own creativity and years of practice, Dan Caro achieved his goal. He is now an accomplished jazz band drummer in New Orleans—a talent he ably demonstrated on stage that day at the World Burn Congress.

As inspiring as Dan's story was on a personal level, as a fire service professional, I found his story—and those of the many other survivors at the Congress—unsettling and frustrating.

As I listened to their stories, it struck me that much of what we (the fire service) fight for and dedicate countless hours toward would have had little or no effect on preventing these tragic events from happening—or from being repeated in the future. These tragedies were not the result of a community's financial constraints or a failure to prioritize funding for adequate staffing. Nor were they the result of a prolonged response time or a lack of specialized fire equipment. They were the result of something far less expensive, far less complex, yet commonly overshadowed in today's fire service—the lack of adequate public education and fire prevention efforts.

As a firefighter, I will never underestimate, nor discount, the necessity of a trained, well equipped and adequately staffed response component. But to assume we can achieve our mission (saving lives and protecting property) without allocating the necessary time and resources to aggressive public education/fire prevention programs and passive forms of fire protection is a dangerous mistake, and people like Dan are living proof. The scars of every burn survivor tell the story of *preventable* pain and suffering.

As we struggle with the demands to maintain or to become a full service fire department, let's not overlook the most basic, yet most effective means of achieving our mission—public education and fire prevention. ☺