

[JEROME BOUVIER: UNBREAKABLE]

Harness racing has its share of heroes, both on the track and off. Jerome Bouvier may not have set out to be an inspiration, but today he is proof that the Universe works in mysterious and magical ways. By Keith McCalmont

Life can take many twists and turns, but it's how you deal with adversity that counts, according to lifelong horseman Jerome Bouvier.

"I've lived life from two perspectives. One, as a 23-year-old man, standing up, with his whole life ahead of him and no real barriers. And then another, ending up in a wheelchair with a lot of limitations and challenges. To live one lifetime from two perspectives is pretty unique so I draw on that a lot as I live my life and challenge myself," says Bouvier.

The 58-year-old is the son of owner-trainer Marcel Bouvier and his life has traversed a roller coaster of ups-and-downs, starting as a groom on the prairie fair circuit, to the high octane, mucho cocaine lifestyle of a California party kid, before finally hitting bottom and reinventing himself as a child and youth outreach worker.

"My dad got me started with horses. I came home from school one day and there were horses in the field," says Bouvier. "He used to be involved with hockey and then one day we had horses to feed. Eventually we raced at Portage la Prairie and Killarney. Wherever the fairs were, of course the racing was there."

Bouvier grew up in Stonewall, Manitoba, a town known for its limestone quarries, and enjoyed a good family life with his parents and four brothers. By the late '70s, his dad's stock reached a tipping point and it was time to decide between going east to Ontario or west to the B.C. and the brand new track at Fraser Downs.

"He choose to go west and came out first with a bunch of horses. He sent a truck back to pick up what was left and I quit school, packed a bag and \$50 and jumped onto the van," laughs Bouvier. "Five days later I got off the truck at Fraser Downs and my dad said, 'What the hell are you doing here?' In the next breath he told me it was time to get to

work. I was 16."

Bouvier had a natural talent with horses. He competed in the Canadian Junior Driving Championships in Winnipeg, and by the age of 19 was in charge of his own barn. However, an offer to go and work in California proved irresistible to Bouvier and he sold off his stock and headed west.

It was a decision that would change his life.



Think back to when you were 20-years-old. How many good decisions did you make? How many times did you get lucky and survive a bad decision?

"I got into the partying pretty good," ad-

mits Bouvier. "I was working for Roger Stein who had 60 or 70 head of horses, and then my last job was with Nicol Tremblay. I had a blast on that circuit. It was the '80s and everyone was having fun.

"Early on, I was sleeping in a tack room or the back of my car because the money went to the drug scene," continues Bouvier. "Cocaine was my drug of choice at the time. I was in my early 20s and enjoying the hell out of myself."

But there was potential for greatness in Bouvier, as well.

"A friend of mine, Jimmy O'Dwyer, asked me to drive his horse for him. I hadn't driven there at that point but Jimmy kept pestering



me to drive this cheap horse he'd just bought for \$500 that hadn't won a race in two years," recalls Bouvier.

Shunned by the other drivers in the room who couldn't understand why a caretaker was in their midst, Bouvier made the most of his first, and last, California drive.

"I went out and won. We paid \$186 to win," he laughs.

And then 10 days later, in July of 1983, Bouvier made a life-changing mistake.

"A bunch of us were down at the Sacramento River and we were partying it up pretty good. This guy showed up with a speed boat and asked if we wanted to go water skiing," starts Bouvier. "I put on the skis and took off down the river. The park ranger clocked us at 57 mph. The boat went left, I went straight and the ski caught and shot me across the water and I crashed into the rocks. As a result, I shattered my spine. I spent a month in a coma and five months in a hospital."

From the thrill of victory to what, for many, would be a spirit crushing tragedy in a span of two weeks.

"That was a time when guys like Ronnie Pierce were racing [there]. I often looked back and wondered what if - - what if I had gotten into driving at the time," says Bouvier.

Incredibly, the accident was not Bouvier's bottom, that certain moment in time when an addict realizes enough is enough.

"I went back to using because it scared me more to be straight than to be high," explains Bouvier. "When you're high, your identity is a 23-year-old partying yahoo dude and if you didn't do drugs then who would you be? I struggled with that and I continued to use and it was my way of life for a long time."

It took two events to bring the partying to a stop for Bouvier. The first, a death, and the second, a simple observation from the type of kids he now spends his life helping.

"My friend Dan was a heroin junkie and his wife left him and took their daughter. He wasn't able to see his daughter unless he cleaned himself up," says Bouvier. "So myself and a friend decided we were going to help



him. Imagine, two cocaine junkies, helping a heroin junkie get clean.

"You'd go outside, do a line [of coke], then go back inside the room and make sure Dan wasn't getting high," continued Bouvier. "But we had a mission to get him grounded. It took four months, non-stop, doing what we were doing to keep him straight and he ended up doing really well."

But Dan relapsed and one morning Bouvier's phone rang and his friend was in a bad way complaining about people partying in his house.

"I drove across the city to his house and found him in the kitchen where he had gotten stuck between the fridge and the wall. There was heroin and syringes on the table. He was calling out for his daughter," says Bouvier.

Frantic, Bouvier wheeled himself from room to room.

"I went into a bedroom and my wheels got caught up in a comforter that had come off the bed. As I untangled myself from the comforter, the blanket pulled away and revealed a set of feet. I wheeled around the side of the bed and saw the body of a young girl," says Bouvier. "I threw myself out of the chair

and dragged myself over to her and there was a syringe stuck in her arm. Her eyes were open and I was asking her over and over again if she was okay. And then I realized she was purple."

He called 911 and spent the agonizing time between the call and the arrival of the paramedics trying to revive the young girl. It was no use. She was long gone.

"I freaked out and pulled her into my lap. I was shaking her and asking her to wake up, wake up. But she didn't wake up," says Bouvier.

The girl was Dan's daughter and she was just 14-years-old.



Bouvier eventually ended up working again for his Dad. He tempered his lifestyle and designed a jogger that would allow him to get behind horses again. They moved from Anaheim to New York and eventually Delaware.

His transformation garnered a lot of attention.

"After Dan's daughter died, I decided I needed to change the way I lived my life," says Bouvier. "I had a lot of PR. I was in USA Today and on news shows. Young people kept calling the track to talk to me. A couple days after this all took off, two young guys

came to the gate to speak to me. They shared their story and mostly I just listened.”

Listening was something Bouvier was good at, and one of the young men offered up advice that would change the trajectory of his life.

“As they said goodbye, one turned back to me and said, ‘You need to be doing something else with your life.’ That stuck with me. It helped me commit to getting drugs out of my life,” says Bouvier.

In time, he enrolled in a Child and Youth Worker Program at Douglas College in B.C., got his diploma, and started working in the field with young people dealing with every-

thing from drug addiction to runaway youth.

“You name it, I did it,” he says. “I also did a lot of public speaking, sharing my story at schools to try and educate kids and keep them safer. I share my story all the time. I’ve spoken to over 300,000 kids and there have been a lot of heavy stories along the way.”

As his career progressed, Bouvier acquired a Master’s degree and ended up running a county-wide program for runaway and homeless youth in northern California for three years. When an opportunity arrived to move home to Canada, he shipped back to B.C. and took over an agency that was folding.

But the tireless Bouvier persevered.

“After a year and a half of writing grants and working hard I created the agency I currently run, which is Access Youth Outreach Services. I’ve developed programs to help kids on the street and have 18 staff. I have to raise all the money to fund the agency which is over \$400,000 per year,” says Bouvier.

For his ongoing efforts to improve the life of those around him he has been honoured with the 2012 Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Medal for community contribution, as well as the 2011 B.C. Courage To Come Back Award. He travels endlessly to share his story with youth and offer up hope and some helpful tools to find their way.

And despite being monumentally busy, there are no complaints. Bouvier finds his work rewarding because he can look back to a time when his life was empty and lacking direction.

“When I got hurt, my identity was attached to that lifestyle so I thought I needed to continue to do it - until my friend’s daughter and those two young men pulled me out of it,” says Bouvier. “I realized I didn’t need to be that old story, and the life I lead now is my true identity. I needed to re-author that story and this is who I am today.”



And now, some 35 years moved on from that life changing accident on the Sacramento River, Bouvier is back in the racing game in a big way.

“Five years ago I got the bug again and a buddy and I bought a horse, and now I’ve got three racing in Sacramento, a yearling Mach Three and a broodmare about to give me another one,” says Bouvier. “I also have a horse on stall rest. It seems this little hobby is becoming more than a hobby. My wife and I love it and it’s my grounding.”

Taking care of horses, and people, just comes naturally to Bouvier.

“It’s part of my childhood and I’m glad to have that balance in my life. I have the best of both worlds, and to do it sitting down with all the challenges that I face makes it all the more sweeter,” says Bouvier. “It goes to show you that we all have challenges in our life, it’s how you respond to it that matters. There’s always a way, really.”



The yearling, a Mach Three filly named Machazulu, brings a wave of excitement to Bouvier's voice.

"She's our little spitfire," laughs Bouvier. "It's been 30 years since I've had a stakes horse. She's staked in the Ontario Sires Stakes and also staked in B.C. and Alberta. It's a sense of accomplishment seeing them grow up. You raise them, you train them and treat them well, and then see them go out and do well."

A friend on a nearby farm helps to train and break, and when ready Machazulu will go to the care of a familiar friend.

"She'll go to Natalie Tremblay who is the daughter of Nicol, who I worked with when I got hurt. She was 14 at the time. We're here 30 years later and she's training one of mine," says Bouvier. "Nicol passed away years ago but I think he'd be happy to know we're working together again."

It's hard to believe how far Bouvier has come, and a young Natalie must surely see the difference.

"Nicol would never let her out of the house unless she was with me. Little did he know," laughed Bouvier. "I think he might have kinda knew, but she was always safe with me. I took her to her first concert to see Van Halen in Los Angeles and she couldn't hear for two days after that. Nicol was a wonderful man and he continued to be a dear friend after I got hurt."

Even at 58 years young, Bouvier continues to chase new goals. He has a dream of opening a freestanding youth centre at a nearby farm.

"I'd call it Youth Town. Something they can call their own and be who they are without judgment," says Bouvier. "I want to create a residential setting for youth that are struggling, but also to bring horses there that needed to heal from injury."

"I could have young people each have a horse to take care of," he continues. "What a place it would be for kids to come and heal."



To learn more about ACCESS Youth Outreach Services and to order Bouvier's book, 'Unbreakable', visit www.jeromeinspires.com.