

Man endures 'life sentence' of paralysis

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Sometimes Grace Chow feels it would have been better if her son, Nicholas Chow Johnson, had died after he was viciously attacked by strangers on an Esquimalt, British Columbia street instead of leaving him in a permanent vegetative state.

"The pain and grief is ongoing," said the Bloor Street and Ossington Avenue resident. "It's a life sentence of pain and anguish."

Living out west for about a year prior to his attack, Chow Johnson was simply walking down the street on his way to see his girlfriend, minding his own business, when he was accosted by a man and two youths associated with the Crips street gang just before 3 a.m. on Oct. 20, 2001.

The reason for the attack? Chow Johnson was wearing red clothing, the colour adopted by the Bloods, a rival gang.

After one of the males yelled "Take off the red!", referring to the 19-year-old's jacket, Chow Johnson was shoved by a youth before being punched in the head by Harry Hiscock, then 19.

Chow Johnson fell, hitting his head on the road. Lying helpless, another kick to his head was delivered by one of the youths.

The trio fled the scene, but was soon apprehended by police. All three were charged with aggravated assault.

The three accused had been drinking prior to the altercation. Chow Johnson had been drinking also. It's not known if Chow Johnson could have steadied himself against Hiscock's punch had he been sober.

Chow Johnson was taken to hospital and was diagnosed with a severe brain injury, likely from the initial punch by Hiscock to the left side of his head, neurosurgeons concluded.

After spending several months in hospital, Chow Johnson was transported to Toronto where he has remained at Toronto Rehab downtown.

Blind in his right eye and paralyzed on the right side of his body, Chow Johnson can't speak or care for himself in any way. He relies on others to feed, wash and move him.

Two of the youths received two- and three-year sentences, followed by three years on probation. For his role in the vicious attack, Hiscock received an eight-year sentence, which left the community reeling.

In April 2008, Hiscock was fully paroled.

"I feel very angry (about the youth sentences) but we have the Youth Criminal Justice Act," Chow said. "I would like for the three of them to come and take care of Nicholas so they can see what they have done. He has irreversible brain damage and will be like this until he dies. Sometimes I wish he hadn't made it because it's so much grief for me, it may kill me. But I have to stay positive."

Despite doctors' bleak diagnosis from the onset, Chow initially held out hope her son would get better. But after several years, she was forced to come to grips with the reality that Nicholas would never improve.

"I think he has a little bit of awareness," she said. "He likes music and he goes for music therapy. We pay for a sitter to keep him company seven days a week. She'll wheel him around and take him to the lobby so he's not just sitting in front of the TV. At least he can see people going by."

Prior to the attack, Chow Johnson was an athletic young man who loved music and dancing, his mother said.

"He was a very nice, kind person," Chow said. "He had lots of friends. He was happy, free spirited. All of that is gone now."

Angela Bianchi, a friend of Chow's, decided to make a documentary about Chow Johnson's attack and the devastating effect it's had on his family.

"I thought it would make a great documentary to show to school kids," said the Keele Street and Eglinton Avenue resident. "It tells how a mother deals with the loss of her son. He's here, but he's not really here. It's such a sad story I didn't think should go untold."



Nicholas Chow Johnson was left in a vegetative state after suffering a beating on an Esquimalt, BC street in 2001.

Chow, who appears in the documentary titled The Red Jacket, has not seen the video and doesn't plan to.

"I'd rather not see it, it's too sad for me," she said.

Bianchi, a journalist who has worked in television, said Chow initially hoped her son would get better, despite doctors telling her a miracle was slim to none.

"It's eight years later and he's not gotten better," Bianchi said. "Nicholas is going to live a long life and it's a lot to deal with. The crime does not go away."

Filmed two years ago, The Red Jacket features Chow, a community activist and a police officer as they re-live the horror of what happened to the young man almost a decade ago.

The 24-minute documentary, filmed in Esquimalt and Toronto, includes shots of the clothing Chow Johnson was wearing when he was attacked, his transfer to Toronto, and life as he will forever know it in a rehabilitation centre.

"Nicholas doesn't have a lot of visitors anymore," Bianchi said. "His girlfriend moved on. His friends don't visit. Just his parents and brother visit."

Bianchi said she contacted the two young offenders and Hiscock for comment in the documentary. All three declined.

The Red Jacket was screened Feb. 6 at the Victoria Film Festival to a sold-out crowd, Bianchi said, adding the Greater Victoria School District is interested in using the documentary as a teaching tool.