

'It feels good to be alive' - Taupō tradie tells of his fiery brush with death



Matthew Martin
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Taupō builder John McDermott next to his workshop fireplace that helped cause his agonising accident.
MARK TAYLOR / WAIKATO TIMES

On a chilly winter's morning in June 2022, Taupō builder John McDermott did what he had done a thousand times before - light the fire in his workshop.

But this time the flames did not take hold, so in went a capful of meths, and in seconds McDermott's life would change forever.

Burning vapour from the full one litre bottle of methylated spirits exploded, covering him with flames, the result being burns to 40% of his body - 25% being third degree burns.

It would see him spend months in Middlemore Hospital's burns unit.

"I was completely on fire, the bottle had gone, I was a fireball," he told the *Waikato Times*.



An almost mummified John McDermott covered in bandages in Middlemore Hospital.

SUPPLIED

"I thought to myself I had to be calm, there was no one else here, but the one thing in my mind was I had to survive - at least for my grandkids."

He tried rolling on the floor, but that did not work, so he walked outside and quickly removed his burning clothes before wrapping himself in a towel and walking to his mates workshop next door.

McDermott was flown to Middlemore, put into an induced coma for four days and received multiple blood transfusions.

“They didn’t think I’d make it, but here I am.”



John McDermott still uses the fire place at his workshop where he had his accident, but now only uses fire-lighters.

MARK TAYLOR / WAIKATO TIMES

After 13 weeks in hospital and 15 surgeries, including multiple skin grafts, McDermott was allowed to go home where he was initially cared for by his daughter Rachel.

“I had to learn to walk again, it was bloody painful, I even had to learn how to write again.”

Eighteen months later McDermott is back on the tools, albeit light duties.

He has to apply moisturiser to his skin grafts at least three times a day and wears compression clothing to help keep the grafts in place.

McDermott, now 64 years old, said it has been, and still was, a long road to recovery and after losing his wife Lea to cancer in March of 2021, was also a lonely road to travel.



John McDermott's legs were the worst hit and are now covered by skin grafts taken from skin off his back.
MARK TAYLOR / WAIKATO TIMES

He said the support he got from his children was amazing, but after learning about the Burn Support Charitable Trust he said the support of others in the same situation had made his journey a lot smoother.

“They have been so good to me, most of them have a lot more to deal with than I do.

“I do want people to know what I did to myself so they don't do the same thing, but that there's also support out there for survivors like us.

“We all have something in common. I remember when they took us swimming, that broke a barrier for me because I'd never been out in public with my burns, so it's been great.”



Burns survivors at a recent Burn Support Charitable Trust weekend away in Taupō.

SUPPLIED

[Burn Support Charitable Trust](#) events co-ordinator Michele Henry said the trust runs an annual Men's Day Out event which was an informal opportunity for male burn survivors to enjoy the company of other survivors.

The trust runs similar events for women and children, and McDermott has spoken to young survivors at a recent children's event.

"As a non-profit organisation with no government funding we rely solely on the generous support of the public and larger organisations who so generously donate to the burn community throughout New Zealand," Henry said.

She said the trust was established in 1987 with the vision to provide support and assistance to individuals and their families both during and after hospitalisation.

"These are usually an overnight trip in a safe environment where stories can be shared, tools and strategies discussed, and where survivors support each other on their individual journeys."

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