

Episode 146: Chris lost his hands in a corn picker

There are a lot of things we have that are amazing, but we take them for granted.

Have you ever seen those videos online where the person being recorded is color blind? And their family gets them those specially-made sunglasses that actually allow a person to see colors, even though they have never been able to before. Of course, everyone in the family wants to see their reaction the first time they put on those glasses.

So they all go outside, and there are usually some brightly colored balloons nearby, and the birthday person opens up this package to find a pair of sunglasses. Nice, thanks for the sunglasses. And of course everyone encourages them to try them on. And what happens when they put those glasses on, and they are now actually seeing colors instead of everything being black and white or just having shades of difference – their reaction is always amazing. In many cases, they are just so overwhelmed by the colors and overcome by emotion, they start to cry because of what they're seeing. In that moment, everything has changed for them. They see everything differently, and they notice every single color.

But for most of us, we walk around every day seeing all of these vibrant colors, and we never have a single thought about it. It's just our normal. We often don't understand or appreciate something until we are able to see the difference between having it, and not having it.

My guest today, Chris, can attest to that. Like most of us, he grew up having hands – a left hand and a right hand. They were right there with him for more than 40 years, always doing what he needed them to do.

But today, the hands that Chris uses are not the hands he was born with.

Scott

You said that you had a feeling that something was not quite right that day. How long did you feel like that before the actual accident happened?

Chris

This happened on the 28th, which was a Friday. 28th of November, 2008. The day before was Thanksgiving, which I had celebrated with my family. On Friday, I got up early and did a few things. I remember my parents were in and out and I had mentioned that I am going to Carlisle for the day to help my friend harvest corn. So I drove down and got there around 7.30 in the morning and had the feeling of, "Something is not right, but I could not put my finger on it." That feeling did not last very long - maybe a few minutes or so. Then, I just continued on with my routine - checking the machinery out to see if everything was intact, everything's going to be operational, and looking for any unforeseen issues that could cause a problem.

Scott

How old were you at this time?

Chris

I was approximately 41.

Scott

So you were taking the day after Thanksgiving just to go to help your friend harvest some corn. For the listeners who are not familiar with corn harvesting - and I include myself among that bunch - what's the process? What kind of machinery is involved?

Chris

This machinery is a dated piece of machinery - probably built in the 50s. It's mostly all mechanical and it connects to a power source, which would be a tractor. The tractor has a drawbar that hooks this piece of equipment and then it puts it in motion or gets the mechanical operation into what they call a power takeoff. It's a drive train that's driven off of the tractor's engine, but also it drives the piece of equipment. Behind this corn picker is a wagon, which is a gravity box inside. It's sloped inside. Once it's full, gravity empties the wagon. So, how this machine works is the planter actually plants stocks of corn in rows specific inches apart. It's shaped like a V in the front. In the V, there were these chains - they're called gathering chains - they've got little ears on them. So what this machine and those chains do is actually pull the stock into the machine. Then right below those chains are two sets of rollers. These rollers are approximately about an inch apart, just wide enough apart for stock to go through it, but not allow the cob of corn to go through it. So it actually pulls the stock of corn down through the machine through the rollers. Once it gets to the top, the next part is it actually will clean the husk off, because the husk is already dried out at this point. There are these rubber fingers in there that clean off the silk. Then, it just goes up through an elevator that is chain driven with a rubber paddle that carries the corn up the elevator into the wagon.

Throughout the day, I was walking around the machine and making sure there were no issues. While I was having issues with those chains that I spoke of, one of them kept falling off. So, I was talking to the farmer and he said, "Why don't you just take it off and just use one?" And I'm like, "Okay, that's a good idea." Fast forward back to around the time of the accident, going through the field, it's already dark.

Scott

Oh, so you've been working all day by now?

Chris

Oh yeah, it was all day. It took me all day to just fill this wagon up. Around 5 o'clock, I noticed that the wagon was starting to overflow with corn. Mind you, this was my last row of corn to be done for the year. As soon as I got to the other end, I was done. Well, I stopped, left the tractor with the PTO running, got off of the tractor, exited, and walked around. I saw the ear of corn laying in the V shape. I went to bat it in with my left hand, but it didn't go in. I went to do it again with my left hand. That time— I don't know, it happened so quickly. The chain grabbed the cuff of my coat and pulled my hand into the rollers. At that point, my left hand was in between those rollers, which I said were an inch apart, and they did not spread. It just stays stationary. It stays stationary. I can add a little bit more detail to the rollers. The rollers actually spin at 12 linear feet per second. So just imagine going through a 12-foot loop, 2 by 4 in one second. That's what happened to my hand.

I do remember hearing a thump and then, initially, pain. Then, I'm like, "What do I do?" My quick reaction was to reach with my right hand. I reach with my right and, at that point, both of my hands are now in the machine.

Scott

Can you describe what's the actual damage to your hands at this time? Are they being cut up? Are they being squeezed into a really tight place? What's actually happening to your hands?

Chris

Well, honestly, back then, I had no idea what happened. I mean, it was like, "How do I get out of this?" So what is happening is those rollers - being only an inch apart - actually squeezed it and actually crushed my hand. The doctors told me later that it degloved and took the skin right off of my hand.

Scott

So you're standing now with both of your hands there in the machine.

Chris

At this point, I was not standing any longer. I was kind of hunched over when it first happened with my left. Then, once I reached in with my right, I was actually in a kneeling position. Picture like I'm praying over this machine. I had my head down. I was stuck in this machine because, at that point, my hands were down. I couldn't move. I couldn't pull them back. I was doing everything I could to pull out in so much pain. I had a back glove on. It's like a hat, but it had an opening in my face. So every time I would turn my head to scream, it would actually cover my face, so it was muting the sound. But also, that tractor was running at 540 RPMs, so that means that tractor was at high idle. This was loud. There was a state road probably 75 to 100 yards away from where I was at. I was pointing in the opposite direction.

I was in this machine and the road was behind me. I was actually going the other direction in the field to finish up. To my left was a house that was probably 50 yards. So I'm in this machine trying to do everything I can to get out. Finally, I was like, "God, let me die. God, let me die. God, let me die." Well, that third time somebody came. What else is relevant is the house that I just said was 50 yards away. There's probably another house 100 yards away. The people that lived in that house that was 100 yards away came over to the house that was 50 yards away and said, "I think there's something going on there. Maybe we should go check." So, at that point, after I said three times, "Let me die," somebody came. I found out later because I went to visit those people. They were saying, "Yeah, I was out earlier, but I only saw the tractor in the field. The lights were on and it was running, but I didn't hear anything." Remember I said I was screaming out in pain? Well, that screaming out was not constant because, at this point, when I'm in this machine, I've lost a lot of blood at this point.

Scott

So how long from the time the accident happened until someone showed up?

Chris

That's a good question. I don't really know.

Scott

When you are in a situation like that, time kind of changes.

Chris

It does, but what's interesting is that I do know the time, but it wasn't when they had come to show up - when they came to find me. I recalled how long I was in this machine before I was life-flighted out of the place, out of the area. Vaguely, I remember it happened around 5 o'clock and I did not get to Hershey Medical Center until 6.30. So that's how long of a window there was. I don't know how long it took for

the neighbor to find me and the emergency crew to get me out of the machine. I do recall them seeing the situation. The one EMT was there and he was telling me, "You're going to be fine. Don't look at your hand," because I guess he was concerned that I would pass out. I couldn't understand why he was saying that. I mean, he really didn't know me. I mean, I grew up on a farm. I've seen a lot of things and he's just basically protecting me from passing out, apparently.

Scott

Yeah, I'm thinking it must have been traumatizing. Before the EMTs showed up, just the people from the house coming over and seeing what your situation was had to be kind of traumatizing for them as well.

Chris

Oh, I'm sure because, I remember, when they came, I was like— you and I are speaking in a normal tone. This was over this machinery. I was giving them phone numbers of who to call. "Call my ex-wife. Call my mother and dad." I was even rallying off the phone numbers just through all of this while my hands were stuck in this machine. I think, by that point, the machine was already off. I remember them saying, "Shut the fuel off." The farmer— I had rattled off his phone number. So the farmer finally came and he helped them get this machine apart.

Scott

Yeah, I got to think that EMTs aren't trained in getting people extracted from farm machinery.

Chris

Well, in this area, especially Pennsylvania where there's a lot of farms around, I think they do have— they're getting a lot more training.

Scott

Yeah, it's a good idea. I think they should be, for sure.

Chris

Yeah. This is kind of a sidebar. I was at a Bingo last night with my wife. One of the firemen was there and I asked him, "Are you a fireman?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Hey, you want to see something cool?" Then, I told him. Then, he said, "Yeah. farm accidents are very traumatic." So I know that they're being trained. I think it depends on where you're located.

Scott

So when you were finally removed, you said you remained conscious. Did you look at your hands at all? Or could you see that they were obviously destroyed? What were you thinking?

Chris

Actually, the only thing I recall was, on my left, my hand was hanging by a thread - literally by a thread. I think, whenever the EMT said, "No, don't look at that," I remember them saying things like, "Get the bird in the air. So they had a— where I live, it's called Life Lion. That's what this helicopter is called - the Life Lion. I remember being loaded on the Life Lion. I remember them shutting the door on my right side and how much pain I was in because I think they bumped what was left of my right arm into the door and everything's happening so fast. I just remember that moment being in pain and then getting on the flight. They had their flight helmets on, so they basically couldn't hear anything I was saying with as much blood I lost and everything.

They were having a very hard time, difficult time getting to my veins because— I had talked to the flight nurse later on and he explained that, whenever you're in a traumatic accident, your body will take your blood flow and take it to your vital organs, your brain, your heart. The rest of it is not being supplied. What else helped me survive, I think, is not pass out or die and that it was cold this time of the year, especially in Pennsylvania in November. It was probably 5 o'clock already. It was probably in the low 30s at that point.

Scott

So you were airlifted to the hospital. Was there any attempt to save your hands?

Chris

That's another good question. I do not know. I do recall another thing that the flight nurse said, which is, "Hey, I know you're in a lot of pain. We're going to get you taken care of." Basically, they gave me whatever pain medication they administer. So it happened in Carlisle and I was going to be flown to Hershey Medical Center. By car, it's a 45-minute drive. By flight, it was 8 minutes. During this flight, I never passed out. So we're flying and there's a couple of conversations went on, but I don't think they really even heard me. I was just listening to what they had to say. Got to Hershey. We landed on the helipad. It's a time when they were remodeling the hospital, building a new wing on. To get into the emergency room, there was a makeshift tunnel. All I recall is laying on the stretcher and watching the lights go by. I remember a nurse coming to me. She said, "Mr. Polak, you're going to be fine. You're in the number one trauma center." That moment is when I passed out. That's the last I recall. So I'm sure that I passed out because I guess I knew I was safe.

I got there - I think I said - around 6.30. I think I was conscious again until the following day. I do not recall the time. At that time, my family was all contacted. My ex-wife was there. My mother and dad, my brother, my sisters, just everybody that had some relation to me - they were there. I remember the doctor coming in with my brother. We were in the room and the doctor said, "I want to talk to you. Do you know what happened?" I said, "Yeah, I lost both of my hands." That's pretty much where I left it. He explained, "Yeah, you lost your right arm four inches or four centimeters below your elbow and they were dislocated. So basically, your right side was basically taken out of the socket, the elbow joint, and we had to reset them and pin them together. We also did a skin graft." So they took a skin graft off of my left leg to wrap this area after the amputation because it was just basically destroyed from the machine, I guess, degloving it as well, as I mentioned earlier.

On my left side, my hand was disarticulated. So it was basically taken right off of the joint. He explained why we had to do what we had to do. He said basically everything was crushed, there was debris, dirt, and grease, and there was no way of saving it. That's where I was at with that.

Scott

I read that when you learned or realized that you now no longer have hands, you decided immediately to turn the negative into a positive. Was it that quick? I mean, that seems like an impulse, like you didn't really realize the full gravity of what had happened. What are your thoughts on that?

Chris

It's interesting you say impulse because it was quick. Yes. I remember laying in my room where there was no one there. It was just me. I was saying that I am not going to take pity from anybody. I mean, I don't know how I'm going to get through this, but I am. So I was in the hospital at that point right after the amputations. I stayed in the hospital for 2 weeks. During that 2 weeks, they had therapists come in -

occupational therapists, physical therapists, and there was even a recreational therapist. It's all relevant as to why they came in because people take these things for granted. But at that point, I couldn't take it for granted anymore. You need to learn how to do activities for daily living. Now that I have no hands, how am I going to brush my teeth? How am I going to bathe myself? How am I going to do this? How am I going to do that? So during all that time, all of that was training. I trained to do all of those things.

I also mentioned I had a recreational therapist. I remember this recreational therapist giving me some literature on hand transplants. This is 2008. They were doing hand transplants in Louisville. Louisville was the first place in the United States that was doing hand transplants. I think the first guy that had them in Louisville had double hand transplants. I think he had lost them to fireworks. Anyway, I read this story and it was interesting. I don't know about transplants but the part that I wasn't sold on was the medication that you had to be on, where you had to go to Louisville for seven or eight months.

Scott

What was it about the medication? I saw that you had rejected the idea because of the medication, but what didn't you like about that?

Chris

It seemed to be a lot. At that time, I was on depression medicine and some others - blood pressure, cholesterol, and that kind of thing - and I felt like I was taking enough already. I didn't want to take any more. So, that was probably the main reason why I didn't do it at that time. I'd get discharged, then I had to be put into another facility where there was a lot more training and a lot more activities for daily living. That time is when I was fitted for prosthetics. I had an appointment at Hershey. In this facility I was at, I remember seeing this guy there. He had lost one leg due to a motorcycle accident and there was this prosthetist there working with him - that's the guy that makes the prosthetics - and I just thought, "Wow, that's fascinating - the things he's doing to get him to use an artificial leg." I just kept that in the back of my mind.

Then, I was given the name of a hand therapist in Hershey. She actually started training me right away and getting me fitted. On my left side, I had what they call a farmer's hook. So, to picture what it looks like, it's a shell sort of made of fiberglass and some other material, but at the very end is a hook mounted to it. This hook actually rotates about 270 degrees and you can flex it. There's a little button - a little spring-loaded thing. When you push it, you can flex it to either all the way to the left or all the way to the right, so you have some movement that way. How it operated was that this hook had real heavy-duty rubber bands and the hook had a cable attached to it that ran up the length of the shell of the prosthetic. It was hooked to a strapping system that actually hooked on both sides of my shoulders. I'm going to say it looked like a bra, but it was on your back. So how you operate it is that you just flex your shoulders. You just move your shoulders in or out. If you move them in, it would actually open that hook and then the rubber band would actually close it. So that was the first thing I was fitted for.

I remember my right side was so damaged at the time and, with the skin graft, it took a lot longer for the healing process, so I couldn't be fitted right away. So I would go to hand therapy, learning new activities for daily living. Even though I talked about daily living activities, that was without my hands. Now I have a prosthetic. I had to learn how to tie my shoes all over again. I learned how to tie my shoes with just that hook. It took me a little bit of time. I mean, of course, I don't have my right and you're constantly wanting to reach over there, even though your hand is not there, and that's where - I know people talk about phantom pain, phantom sensations - I had phantom sensations. It was more of like, "Oh, even though my right arm wasn't there, I could feel that I have a hand now on my right. It's just kind of weird.

Scott

That's incredible. You had that right arm for 41 years. You're still going to imagine that it's there. So you were tying your shoe with just your left hand...

Chris

And the hook.

Scott

Yeah. Hook. Prior to this, were you left-handed or right-handed?

Chris

I was right-handed for 41 years. Then, this accident happened and I did not know it at this point but I started to learn to do things with my left such as the hook.

Scott

Yeah, you were kind of forced into it, at least, at this point in the process, anyway.

Chris

Yeah. At this point, when I'm going through this, I was like, "I have no other options here. What am I going to do?" By then, I could learn how to hold a toothbrush with my book. The occupational therapists were the greatest because they always came up with these little things because they're taught in school how to deal with these kinds of situations. I could use a fork and a spoon in that hook to feed myself. That was what was great about all of it. It's learning— let me restate that. It's not that it was great that this happened. It was just great that, "Oh, I don't know how I'm going to get through, but I am." That was, to me, a blessing.

Scott

Yeah, you're gaining back a little bit of independence with each new thing you learn.

Chris

Exactly. I'm glad you say that because, at this point, I lost my independence, so I'm regaining it. My right side took a little longer to heal. It took probably 6-8 months before I could be fitted. So I was fitted on my right side with what they call myoelectric. How it operates was— picture my arm. On this stub, you would put this silicone sock and it was sort of tight. It was interesting how you put it on because you rolled it up and then you took a spray bottle - we had alcohol bottles - and we sprayed it on silicone and it actually made the thing go on so smoothly. My prosthetist showed us that. That was really cool. The reason why I had to have that silicone sock is because this myoelectric— there were little sensors on my, what they call, muscle bellies. Whenever you flex your hand or make a fist or move your hand a certain way, there are different muscle bellies that are moving. So, what they do is they try to attach these sensors onto those muscle bellies so that, when you do make those movements, even though your hand is not there and you want to flex your wrist, you still are going to be able to move that muscle and it's going to open and close that prosthetic. So, I was finally fitted and finally, they finally got it right and everything, all the sensors working and everything.

However, I didn't like it because it just felt like an extension. It just felt like a heavyweight. Say, for example, just take an umbrella. You hold it straight out, you hold your arm straight as possible, and you just hold it out in front of you. Well, eventually you're going to get tired because you have nothing to

support that at the end. So, it causes you to get tired and weak. That's how I felt with the right prosthetic. However, I'm still grateful at this point because I'm gaining this independence.

Scott

I would think their response to you for that would be, "Yeah, I know it feels that way now, but you just got to work up to it. You'll get used to it." Were they telling you anything like that?

Chris

Oh, yeah, they were, and I took that advice. I actually could do a lot more with my hook than I could with my electric hand.

Scott

You read an article about someone who got the first double hand transplant.

Chris

Yeah. This was actually in the new year by then. There was a story about the first unilateral transplant in Pittsburgh. I was just fresh out of the army, so I still had friends texting me. This one guy that I was friends with said, "Hey, did you see that? The person they just transplanted in Pittsburgh." So I looked at the story and I wasn't interested. A few months later, I remember seeing a magazine at the prosthetist's office about the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA). This magazine talked about phantom pain, phantom sensation, talked about what it's like living with the amputation. There was also an article in there of Dr. Lee talking to this one patient who had viral meningitis, lost both of her hands and was going through some issues. Then, he just talked about the article. She could be a potential candidate for transplants. So I saw that and I kept that in the back of my mind.

Then, around July of 2009, my parents had a People Magazine sitting on the kitchen table and I was like, "What's this about?" I saw a picture on the front about a story that says about, "This Air Force veteran just had double hand transplants, wants to be able to hold his grandchild, wants to be able to bake again, and wants to be able to throw softballs." So I went through the story, read the story, and it was just very inspiring to me of all the things he wanted to do. At the end of that article, there was some information on who to contact. I reached out to the number and contacted them the next day. At this point, I thought about it and I kind of was already sold on it, even though I just read that article and they didn't tell me anything. They didn't tell me if I was accepted or anything, but I'm going to do this. I actually was thinking, "What do I have to lose at this point?" Because it has already been 7 months since I had not had hands. The next day, they told me that I had to be around 40 years old, had to be healthy, and had to be below the elbow amputee. I was actually both below the elbow. So they're like, "Oh, yeah? Then why don't you come out?" So I went to Pittsburgh.

Scott

This was Pittsburgh. How far away were you from there?

Chris

I live in Harrisburg, so it's about 3 hours.

Scott

I mean, it could have been that People Magazine was talking about this guy that had surgery in California or something.

Chris

At the time, after I read it, it was done in Pittsburgh. That is interesting. I've never looked at it that way, but that's interesting. What was nice is my brother lives in Pittsburgh, so we stayed with him. I was there for 5 days. Each day, I had different things I had to do. There were psychological tests. There were psychiatrists and talking to social workers.

Scott

And this is just to determine eligibility, right?

Chris

Yeah. So I went through this thing. On the 5th day, I remember them doing pheresis. What they did is they actually extract from you - you're on this machine and it's actually hooked to you - and they keep these cells and they store them and deep freeze them. If you are a candidate and chosen, once you have the transplants and something happens, they can actually administer them back to you.

Scott

They were planning ahead...

Chris

They were planning ahead and they were pretty thorough. So, for 5 days, I went through all that. I also remember going to talk to the doctor. Dr. Lee and some other doctors were in there and they're like, "Yeah, you'd be a great candidate. The DOD was funding this, so it was all research." I wasn't really thinking of any of that. I was like, "I'm going to do this. I had nothing to lose." So like I said, they said, "You'd be a good candidate. You have to wait until a year post-amputation." By then though, I was already 7 months past my amputation. So I went back home and went on about my life, and I was excited to tell everybody. That year, my children— I have twins, boy and girl, and they were going to turn 18. Going through all of that - getting out of the military, losing my job, and calling all these insurances about all the different things about your traumatic loss and all that - I said to my kids about— I was deployed to Germany in 2002, so I wanted to go back. I said, "What do you think about going to Germany for your 18th birthday?" So I went to Germany with them right before my transplant. I came home in December of 2009, called, and put my name on a list. Two months to the day that I put my name on the list, they found a donor. February 3rd was the evening I was called.

Scott

What were the requirements for a match? I mean, obviously, blood type and size. But what were they looking for?

Chris

Scott, there was so much. I still don't even really know the full answer. I just know that during all that blood work - I remember they drew 17 vials of blood out of me and they were testing for viral strands, I remember that was a big thing - they were making sure that everything matches up somewhat somehow. I don't know. I can't wrap my head around it to figure that out, but that's what they did. So they had to find somebody that was of almost the same size.

Scott

I tend to think of just, like, superficial things. You're a white man. If a donor that was a perfect match came up and it was the hands of a black man, I mean, do you say no? I mean, you'd still have hands even

if they are going to look like they don't match your body. Or maybe they don't even consider a match like that?

Chris

I don't know. I don't think that they would do that. I really don't. I don't know the right answer.

Scott

No, probably not. I mean, there's got to be other ramifications for that too, psychologically. I don't know. I mean, obviously, that's not what happened anyway. So, you found out that you were a match. What happened from that point?

Chris

I got this phone call around 11.30.

Scott

That's 1130 at night?

Chris

1130 at night, yeah. What's strange is that— living at my parents', they had a landline. Back then, something had to be wrong if you were getting a phone call that late at night. So I decided to pick it up. Then, that's when they said, "We had found this match. We need you in Pittsburgh by 7 o'clock in the morning." This is 11.30 at night, so 8 hours. I remember getting off the phone. My mother and dad were asleep. I had to wake them up. We got in the car and we drove to Pittsburgh. We got there before 7 and they said, "Oh, yeah, we're going to be doing your surgery in a couple of hours." Well, something happened and it ended up being postponed until the 5th.

Well, to set the scene, it was February 5th. At that time of the year, Pittsburgh gets a lot of snow. Maybe you recall this but they called it the snowpocalypse. DC got shut down. It snowed that hard. One of the doctors that did my microsurgery was from UCLA. However, he was red-eye flighted to Pittsburgh during this snowstorm and the reason he was is because he was part of the team prior to my surgery. I thought that was interesting because, as soon as my surgery was over, he had to go back to UCLA. I do recall them having an anesthesiologist come in and they, of course, put all their different connections to you to connections. That's the last I recall because I think I was in and out of it by then because the medicine may have been kicking in or whatever.

I recall the surgery being 11.5 hours long. There were 21 surgeons and there were four operating tables. So they're preparing me on two tables. There's a table on it under each arm. They're preparing that area. Then, they're preparing the limbs of the donor on another table. A little bit of what I know of the donor is that the man was from West Virginia who's brain dead. I know this because I could see it. He had red hair. I remember waking up the next morning and the doctor saying, "Wiggle your fingers, but don't move them too much because everything's all the connections are new - all the sutures and so on and so forth.

Scott

You don't want to break them right away, right?

Chris

Exactly. But I moved them. I was like, "Wow..." So I had that in my mind that I'm getting transplants. My hands are going to work right away. I was definitely put down by that because that's not how it worked.

Scott

Well, at least you had control of it. I mean, that's the sign of success they were looking for - that you could move your fingers. So what they did had worked.

Chris

But in my mind, I was thinking that I'm going to have full function. I guess that was irrational to think that. Right after that surgery, of course, they usually try to get ambulatory right away. So I was out for 11.5 hours on full medication. They're trying to get me to walk just a little bit and it felt like I was walking 10 miles, but it was only a short distance. I started doing hand therapy. It's to make sure to lower the swelling and just different things that happened after surgery. So they were trying to prevent all of those things.

Scott

Yeah, your therapy schedule was crazy.

Chris

Yeah, in the beginning, it was 6 hours a day, 5 days a week. A lot of times, they want to do more. They want to do it on the weekends. At that point, I was thinking, "Wow, I can't do all this. I'm still looped up on the medication from surgery." It seemed like it took a couple of weeks for that to go out of my system. Then, all the different medications. Before the transplants, they give you this medication that depletes your system of all immunity. So basically, you're susceptible to anything afterward. So basically, they're tearing you down and building you back up.

After the surgery, I was in what they call TICU, Traumatic Intensive Care Unit. I was in this TICU for 2 weeks, taken care of the whole time. I couldn't move my arms. I mean, I had them in these pillow-type things made of foam to protect my arms. I know we talked about independence, but I lost my independence again. But now, I'm regaining this independence.

We were talking about how long these occupational therapy appointments were. They were 6 hours a day. I was in Pittsburgh now and I was there for 7 months, from February to August. During that time frame of going through all these therapy sessions, my routine was I got up in the morning— I stayed at this place called "Family house." It was a non-profit organization that allows people to stay there, depending on what kind of thing they were having at UPMC. Because I was in this research program, they actually paid for my stay there. I had to have a family member with me because they had to prepare my meals. It was like an old sort of hotel.

So I get up in the morning. My parents or whoever was staying with me— people would stay a week at a time. One week, it'd be my mother or my dad, or whoever I would go over to the hospital. First thing in the morning, I'd have to go for blood work. There were a lot of transplant patients because they did a lot of transplants in Pittsburgh, but they all had to have blood work because their doctors were trying to get these medication levels to make sure everything was going the way it was supposed to. I would get so frustrated because, sometimes, it would take an hour or two. I would sit down there for an hour or two. So that whole time— I'm kind of a go-getter. I got to be on the move. I was in the military and it doesn't help to just sit around. Like, what we call in the army is "Hurry up and wait." That's one thing I can't

stand - sitting and waiting around for what?. Can't we process this or speed it up? Eventually, as anything else, what I found out later, everything in life's temporary.

So I would go through the blood work. It would be an hour late for therapy. By then, I was thinking I was starting 8 to 2 - that'll be my 6 hours. Then, of course, my doctors wanted to come in and see how I was doing. They wanted to do video and they want to do this and do that. I actually got to the point where, "How am I going to make this time up? You want me to be doing this, do well, and do my best, but then you're coming in and taking away my time?" So basically, what they would do is, when they come in, if they were in there for an hour, then I'd have to stay another hour. I didn't want to do that. I wanted 6 hours and I wanted to be done. I was just adamant about that. But again, it was temporary. I went through all that, and those are just hard little growing pains I went through.

During this therapy, I actually met - in the article I read in the People's Magazine - Jeff Kepner. He had to come in. I forget why he was there, but he had to do some therapy and he was like, "Why are you working so hard? I just want to get done. I want to go home." That's one thing about me, Scott - I'm a worker. I will stay at something until I am done. It doesn't matter what it is. I will work on it. I'm determined to get it done. That was what I was determined to do. So I went through the therapy and that guy was telling me that and the backstory is I'm doing much better than he is. Hindsight is that therapy paid off. Finally, it came to time. I got to come back home. Going through all those growing pains in Pittsburgh at that time, I was told that I came back and went to Hershey. I actually got to go back to the hand therapist that fitted me for my prosthetics. All in all, I went to therapy for 5 years.

Scott

What can you do now with your new hands that you couldn't do when you first got them?

Chris

Well, I always start off with this. That's a good question. Always, people will ask me that. What can you do? It's not what can I do, but how can I do it? I know that I have limited dexterity. I was a mechanic prior to losing my hands. I still have the mindset to be a mechanic, but I just can't do that. I just don't have the dexterity to do that type of work. Again, determination is a word that doesn't leave me. I am determined to do it. I actually work on my own stuff at home. I have small engines like blowers and weed eaters and slumbers and I do that kind of mechanic work on that stuff. Basically, I'm not under the gun to say, "Oh, well, you need to get this job done faster." No one's pressuring me to do that.

I can honestly say the only thing I can't do or haven't tried is I've not fired a weapon because, now that I'm left-handed, you have to hold the weapon differently than you do when you're right-handed. The other thing is I don't have the strength. I mean, even though pulling the trigger may not seem like a lot, I don't have enough strength in my fingers to do it.

Scott

So you can move all your fingers, but you just don't have the same grip strength as with your original hands.

Chris

No. A man can have anywhere from 80 to 100 pounds of strength in his hand. You're like, "That's a lot." I think the most I've ever had was 20. That's probably a good comparison of what I had and what I have now. But you know what? I don't discount any of it.

Scott

Yeah. That's the way to look at it. I mean, comparing it to a person that never lost their hands, you're a lot less. But comparing it to what you had when you were standing there in the field stuck in the machine, you're miles ahead of that.

Chris

I can also say, I know this is a traumatic story. We're talking about it and what was it like kind of thing, and I'm telling all the ins and outs. There are other stories out there that I have no idea what it would be like because I'm not in those shoes, so I can relate. I can understand what's going on, but I've never lived it. So it shows me to be more compassionate, I can say that, to respect what I have.

Scott

Because we don't know what other people have gone through. Let me ask you one final question. Why is it important for you and for people to hear your story? What's the message you want to get out there?

Chris

It is an inspiring thing, an inspiring situation for people to hear because I know everybody in life has troubles. They don't care who you are. Sometimes, by telling your story, you may tell it to somebody that you don't even know what's going on and it can make their day much better whenever they see it and see what they've gone through. I have a good quick story. My wife and I met online, but it was not a dating site. I posted my story about losing my hands and how thankful I was. Her story was about how she was going through a divorce and how hard it was for her. But then, she read my story and she's, "Wow, this man. I cannot believe how thankful he is and all everything he's been through. My story is not that bad." That's what I'm trying to— the point I'm trying to make is that, yeah, you can't discount anybody's story, but you can also enlighten somebody's day by hearing their story, and that's what I felt that happened between me and my wife and I. An ending note is we've been married a month now. We've been dating each other since 2011. I actually met her for the first time on the one year anniversary of my hand transplant.

Scott

So you just got married?

Chris

Yes. I just got married.

Scott

Congratulations. I didn't even know that.

Chris

Oh, well, thank you. Thank you. Just got married. We're living here in Pennsylvania and things are all good. I'm blessed and thankful.

Scott

Life is good.

Chris

Yes.

Scott

If someone is hearing this and is going through something - maybe not losing their hands, but something traumatic or might be discouraged or whatever - and would like to contact you, you've said that it's okay. We'll put your email address in the show notes so people can contact you if they would like to.

Chris

Sure.

Scott

Chris, thanks so much for sharing your story.

Chris

Oh, you're welcome, Scott. My pleasure.

Scott

The thing that struck me about this story is the outlook that Chris had, right from the start – okay, this thing happened to me, I can't go back and change what happened, but I can be determined to do the best I can with what I have. I really hope that if I ever have something like this happen to me, that I would have that same outlook.

You can get the full transcript for this episode, and you can also see pictures of Chris and what he can do with his new hands, in the episode notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/146.

I did another episode that was kind of similar to this one, where my guest Jeff talks about losing his arm while he was working at a summer job when he was 18 years old –

Jeff

While that was happening, I was trying to pull myself out. At this point, the machine actually started to pick me up off the ground and pull me in head-first. At that point, I started screaming because (1) it hurts, and (2) I wanted somebody to turn the machine off because I knew that I wasn't able to get myself out.

Scott

And believe it or not, that episode will have you laughing because Jeff has a great sense of humor and there are definitely some funny parts to his story. That's episode 100, called "Jeff's arm was torn off".

And now I'm super excited to tell you about a new project, and it's one that you can be involved in. This is a great opportunity to seriously make someone's day.

We all know that working in the service industry is a tough job. More specifically, I'm talking about food service. The hourly pay is really low, sometimes way less than minimum wage, so food servers have to rely on tips to make a living. These people work really hard, and they have to keep smiling no matter what's happening during their shift.

So I want to make at least one person's shift very happy. This is where you come in, and you can participate in this at WhatWasThatLike.com/server. I'm asking you to kick in a dollar or two or whatever

you feel like contributing. When it gets up to a substantial amount, I'm gonna take that money and present it to a food server as a gift. This is gonna be so cool, to be able to tip someone like \$500. Maybe even more than that – I honestly don't know what to expect.

I posted about this project in the podcast Facebook group recently, and the vast majority of people there are excited about this idea too. And just to be clear, I'm not taking anything out of this. This is being done through GoFundMe so everyone can see their donation and everyone knows what the total amount is. GoFundMe will take out their fee, but everything else is going to go directly to someone who works hard and needs that money.

So I invite you to join us in this fun little project! Go over to [WhatWasThatLike.com/server](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/server) and put in whatever you're comfortable with. And I'll have further updates here on the podcast, and also in the Facebook group. If you're not in that group yet, that's at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook). I can't wait to see what happens with this!

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz.
Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now, once again, we find ourselves at this week's Listener Story. This is a story sent in by a listener – and since you're a listener, you could send in YOUR story! Just something interesting, 5-10 minutes long, nothing elaborate. You can record it on your phone and email it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com and there's a pretty good chance we'll all hear it here on a future episode.

This week's Listener Story is from Cecilia, who was on drugs without knowing about it.

Stay safe, and I'll see you here in two weeks!

(Listener Story)

Cecilia

Hi Scott. My name is Cecilia and I love your podcast. I just wanted to share the story because, every time I tell friends or anything like that, it always gets a good reaction. So, I thought maybe you or the listeners might enjoy it. I will preface it by saying it may be triggering to some people who have had bad experiences with being drugged or drugs in general. I also want to say I was in an incredibly safe situation. My life was never in danger. I was with my family the whole time and everything was totally fine. This is the story of the time I got drugged with meth.

I was with my family, out of town at a very Christian wedding of a family friend of ours. My parents, my family didn't grow up super religious. We went to church every once in a while but it was never very serious, and this was a very traditional, very devoted Christian wedding, I'll say. Their first kiss was their "I do" kiss, and everyone there was very straight-laced, for the most part. They didn't have any hard alcohol - just wine and beer. Pretty much everyone was quite straight-laced, aside from our table of family, friends, and stuff that were a little bit – I wouldn't say we're crazy or anything, but there was a group of us that was more delinquent than the rest. So some of my friends or family friends brought in little shooters of hard alcohol and we were definitely the odd man out there in the very Christian environment that we were in.

From my perspective, I remember the first set of the band and nothing really after that. I have three flashes of memory. One is me looking at myself in the bathroom, thinking, "I only drank wine. How did I get this drunk? I didn't drink that much wine." The second one is me running around as fast as I can, trying to pick up all the bouquets of flowers from the table after the band had stopped to help clean up when everybody was leaving. I don't know why I was doing that. And the last one is me in bed in a ball, naked, crying, with my sisters trying to make me put clothes on.

From my family's perspective, the band played three sets. After about the first set, I start going crazy on the dance floor. You all don't know me, but I'm pretty reserved and I'm shy. I'm not a big dancer. I'm kind of in the background. I'm pretty shy. They saw me on the dance floor with my fists pumping and my jaw clenched and looking like I was— I mean, I must've been having fun, but looking like a crazy person and they were like, "What is up with Cecilia? We have never seen her like this before." And my stepmom almost immediately was like, "She's on drugs. She's definitely on drugs. That's not normal."

So they kind of honed in their focus on me. We got through the night and got back to our Airbnb at the time. They were asking me, "What did you take? What did you do?" I was like, "I didn't do anything. I'm just drunk. I don't know what you guys are talking about. I just drank wine." Eventually, I started crying because they were asking me a lot of questions. I was on meth, so it was a little emotional and I wouldn't stop crying until my sister threw a pizza on the ground, and that made me laugh for a second and then I started crying again. I didn't know why I was crying. It was very emotional

I got through the night. My family clothed me, wiped away my tears, and did as best as they could. Then, I got back to New York where I was living at the time and I took a drug test when I got back. I had methamphetamine and MDMA in my system. So my best guess is that somebody else had molly water in their wine or some sort of liquid molly in their wine or something and I actually drank someone else's wine and ended up being cut with meth. I don't know. I don't know how I got meth in my system.

Anyways, weeks went by. Then, I saw the couple post their wedding photos on a Facebook album, and I was like, "Oh gosh." So I looked through the Facebook album and, there I am, lo and behold, on meth, in the background of all these wedding photos. I look absolutely ridiculous. I'm like, jaw clenched, eyebrows furrowed, arms up, looking like a person on meth you would imagine they would look. So yeah, that's how I ended up being on meth, and probably one of the last places you want to accidentally be on meth at. Yeah, I tried meth just once and I don't think I'll ever do it again, not on purpose, at least. Thanks for listening. I love your podcast. Keep doing what you're doing.