

## **Chapter 9 – William Bussear, Quadriplegic by Accident, Mexican By Choice and Marriage, Isla Aguada, Campeche**

Instead of making this chapter a question and answer interview like all the others, I let Bill tell his own story in his own words. He wrote so movingly about what it is like to be handicapped in Mexico and to compare it to his experience in the United States that I would have wielded a dull butter knife compared to his rapier of insightful writing. There is such a bubbling optimism in his writing that I never had. And he's the one who is "confined" to a wheelchair. So who's really handicapped here?

By the way, I've read that "handicapped" is not the accepted term to use when referring to people with disabilities (which is the preferred way to talk about someone who has a disability). With all due respect to those to whom such distinctions are important, I felt that if the man in the chair wants to use the term "handicapped," then who am I to say anything else?

### **William and Thelma – A Love Story**

My wife Thelma was born in the jungle at San Manuel, Tabasco, Mexico in 1942. Her father's name was José Cabrera and her mother's name was Elosa Dominguez Aguilar. He was a young rural schoolteacher and she was the daughter of a rich rancher. He read books and he played the guitar and sang beautiful love songs. She fell in love, but her father was furious!

When Thelma was born, José told Elosa that he wanted to name her Thelma. He said that he had read a book about a young lady who was named Thelma. He thought it was a beautiful name. Eight days after Thelma was born the dugout canoe and which he was riding tipped over. The edge of the canoe hit him in the back of the neck paralyzing him instantly.

Hopefully, the blow was severe enough to render him unconscious and he just floated into eternity. Thelma only knew her dad for eight days. She has carried this pain with her all of her life. She said that in school, when they would have father-daughter dinners, she would feel especially lonely.

Before you asked the question I think I should answer it. Yes, she does think that it is more than a coincidence that her father became a teacher and then a quadriplegic and died in the water. I became a quadriplegic, lived through the water and became a teacher.

She wonders about the fact that the instant she saw me, when she was standing in that doorway in Cuernavaca, she fell in love and she knew that she would marry me.

She had a wonderful stepfather who was named Fernando Espinosa. He was a great civil engineer beginning in the early 1950s. If you have never traveled on the *autopista* between Mexico City and Puebla, you have traveled on a road he designed and built. If you have ever driven on the *autopista* between Mexico City and Cuernavaca, you have traveled on a road he designed and built.

He also designed and was designated as head engineer on the road between Puebla and Cuernavaca. Sadly, coming home from a conference in Puebla in August of 1963, he was killed in an automobile accident. While he was in the conference, unbeknownst to him the chauffeur was drinking. Thelma has lost two fathers.

I taught high school Spanish in Corona, California and Thelma taught elementary school in Ontario, California.

This was Excerpted from the book [It's All Uphill From Here](#) by [William L. Bussear](#) (to be published in 2010). Used with permission and unedited.

## **The Handicapped in Mexico**

© William L. Bussear

### **Then – 1962**

On November 3, 1961 my life changed forever. I was serving in the United States Marine Corps as a radar operator. We were on military maneuvers on the island of Lanai in Hawaii. After 45 days, the maneuvers terminated and we moved our radar equipment from the mountaintop down to the beach. We were unaware where these maneuvers would lead America. In just a few short years we would enter one of the saddest moments in America's history, the Vietnam Era.

The Navy was supposed to be waiting for us on the beach, but like always, they were late. The lieutenant in charge of the operation told us that we could set up the mess tent and go swimming. We quickly complied and were soon cavorting on the beach. I dove into shallow water and felt this tremendous blow to my body. I had my eyes closed and I saw stars just like when you get punched in the nose.

I laid there holding my breath, floating face down in the water. I opened my eyes and I saw my hands and arms floating downwards in front of me. To my horror, when I tried to get up, nothing happened. I could not move. I held my breath until my body was screaming for air; it must've been three minutes, and every second I was getting closer to death. I knew that when I was forced to breathe, I would die. I would drown. All kinds of thoughts ran through my head as I lay there. I would never see our farm again. I would never hear my father laugh again. I would never feel my mother embracing me and

kissing me on the cheek again. I would never be able to play with my brother and my sisters again. I would never be able to hold my Grandma Emma again. I would never do anything again.

When I was absolutely certain that I would never see the sky again, I felt two strong hands grab my shoulder and turn me over. I took in the most delicious lung full of air I have ever experienced in my life. My savior was Scotty Gossard, a Marine Corps buddy. I had become a C5, C6 quadriplegic.

What followed was; holes drilled into my skull, 35 pounds of traction, an operation, unconsciousness for 4 days, placed on a Stryker frame (*a stretcher-like device upon which the patient is placed face up for two hours, then another stretcher is placed over the top of the patient and bolted into place. A nurse stands at the head and another at the feet, they count to three in unison, on the count of three, and the patient is turned onto his face. The stretcher upon which the patient was lying is removed. This process goes on every 2 hours, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for 10 weeks.*), 2 1/2 months at Tripler Army Hospital, 3 months at Great Lakes Naval Hospital and then 7 months at Crile VA hospital near Cleveland, Ohio.

During the entire time, I became acutely aware of what it was like to be in a quadriplegic. Sure, there were many nights when I was in my room alone when I cried. I cried because I knew that the young man I was just becoming before my accident would never be. He would never again see girls with flirtatious eyes glancing his way with those little smiles. He would never stand embracing his sweetheart. He would never walk her down the aisle. That young man was dead.

The fear of not knowing where this paralyzed body would take me, frightened me for a while. After several months I reached the decision that I was going to take control and I was going to make the best of a bad situation.

Nothing at that time was accessible. Inaccessibility in those days was just taken for granted. Nothing was accessible and that was that. It wasn't until years later that we began talking about the need for accessibility and the need for handicapped parking. When my parents came to visit me at the hospital in Cleveland, Ohio and they took me out to eat, the restaurants had steps. So, we either had to find two men to carry me up the steps like a piece of meat or I had to eat my meals in the car.

*Mike, please remember that at this time I had only been injured for six or seven months. When my parents took me out of the hospital after all of that time, it was my first time in public. It was a very strange experience having to be carried around like a piano. It was not something I was used to. It was not something that I liked. After I left the hospital in Cleveland and I was in the public eye every day, I was not self-conscious at all. I just knew that I needed help to get where I wanted to go. I was very appreciative when anybody would help me. It is a very positive thing when an able-bodied person takes the time to help someone who is disabled.*

I felt very self-conscious because when my father would carry the meal out to me and help me eat it, the people in the restaurant would look out the window at me. I knew they were wondering why I didn't come into the restaurant. It took me a while to get used to people staring at me. In those days, paraplegics were a rarity. When I did go into public everyone stared at me. I didn't know what to do or where to go, but I know that I didn't want to be where I was.

Crile VA Hospital had been built during 1944 for German prisoners-of-war. The hospital grounds consisted of a multitude of wooden, clap-board constructed buildings that were connected by a passageway that bisected the rectangular-shaped buildings. In the summertime the heat was unbearable.

*But, I guess if it was good enough for the German prisoners of war, it was good enough for catastrophically disabled American veterans.*

I arrived there on April 16th and I was astounded by the way they had men, paralyzed from the neck down, lying in about 15 beds alongside each other down both sides of each long bay. There was no privacy and there was no dignity or compassion in that place. Everything was done as if in a factory. The bathroom scene was especially degrading as they placed your paralyzed body in a toilet chair and lined you up with the others waiting your turn. After that; you were dressed, put in your wheelchair and instructed to try to push off the ward. I hated that place with all of my soul. I did not know how, but I did know I was going to leave that place forever.

One morning in late November I woke up and I was freezing. I noticed that I could see my breath when I uncovered my head. I looked down several beds to my left hand I saw a paraplegic, sitting up on his bed with his blanket over his head. I looked at the window at the head of his bed. The window sill was covered with snow on the inside.

I said to him, *My God, Bob, you have snow on the inside of your windowsill.*

He looked down towards me and said, *So do you.*

Without even thinking I said to him, *We better get out of here before we die of pneumonia.*

Shivering he replied, *Where do you want to go?*

I said to him, *Let's go to Mexico, I hear the sun shines there all the time.*

We left the first week in December. After more than a year in hospitals and all of their rules and regulations, it was great to be finally free. I didn't know exactly what being free meant for me, but I knew I was going to find out.

We drove down to Parkersburg, West Virginia and picked up Bob's able-bodied friend Bill Walters. We drove up a ridge road bought some moonshine. The three of us drove on down through Kentucky and into Nashville, Tennessee.. We attended the Grand Old Opry at the Ryman Auditorium.

When we left there on Sunday morning, we never stopped until we were deep in the heart of Texas. There was a great feeling of anticipation as we left San Antonio, to cross the Río Grande and begin our adventure. I remember thinking about how American women looked at me and it was a look that always reminded me of my disability. I was hoping that Mexican women would be different.

We crossed the border at Piedras Negras after loading our car up with supplies on the American side. Before long, we left the small town behind us and we were driving across the desert of old Mexico. It was so exciting. From time to time we would see villages up ahead and would have to slow down or stop because a boy with a herd of goats was crossing the highway.

Farmers with teams of oxen would be working in the dry fields or a man would be guiding a donkey overloaded with sticks down the side of the highway toward some dwellings. For the longest time, we drove across desert with little or no evidence of human habitation.

Bob looked at me and said, *Man, this must be the hottest, most desolate place on the face of the earth.*

I smiled at him and reminded him what it was like back in frigid Cleveland.

There was very little traffic on this highway and when a car came up slowly alongside us, we took notice. It was a car load of young girls and they were waving and smiling at us.

*Americanos. Americanos. Where are you going?* they shouted.

We told them that we were headed for Mexico City.

*Are you going to stop at our town to spend the night?* they asked.

We thought that was a splendid idea. *Where is your town?* I asked.

*Follow us and we will show you the hotel,* they said.

Their town, *Primero De Mayo*, was really a large village with a hotel/motel perched on the side of the hill about one quarter mile off the highway. If they were surprised when Bill took our wheelchairs from the trunk of the car, they didn't show it. Soon, I had a beautiful young girl pushing my wheelchair across the dirt parking lot. When we reached the hotel, two men in uniform came outside and helped us up the steps into the lobby and into the restaurant. The young lady seemed to be very interested in me and, as we ate dinner, we told them all about our lives and they told us about theirs.

For the first time in more than a year, I was enjoying the company of a beautiful young girl who seemed to be genuinely interested in me as a human being and not as some pathetic crippled person.

After dinner we sat in a hotel lobby and talked for several hours before saying goodnight. They told us that they would be back in the morning to see us off. That night before going to sleep, Bob and I talked about how Mexico seemed to be different than the United States. As we drifted off to sleep, we certainly hoped that it was so. The next morning as we were eating breakfast the girls came and sat with us as we finished. Bill loaded me into the passenger seat and put our wheelchairs into the trunk.

My young lady came over to my side of the car and asked me, *Will you send me a postcard from Mexico City?*

I told her I would and we drove onto the highway and headed south.

I tell you all this so you can try to appreciate my situation. I had come from a place that was not accessible and I was going to a place where the handicapped were rarely visible. Of course, I wasn't even thinking about that, I was just escaping from the VA hospital.

What I was about to encounter was a society where having a handicapped child was a shameful thing. The Mexican male considered a handicapped child somehow a negation of his manhood. The Mexican female wondered if perhaps God was punishing her for some unremembered transgression.

*Mike, to answer your questions about the two different attitudes towards the handicapped in my story, let me say this. Mexicans treat all foreigners as if they were royalty. The fact that I was in a wheelchair just meant that they would carry me around if necessary to show me Mexico. They did it with a smile on their face and with the sincerest of intentions.*

*I believe that the humanity of the Mexican is unequalled. They will literally give you the shirt off their back if they think you need it.*

*Yet, if they have a handicapped child or relative, they're somehow ashamed. Their humility and religion plays a role in how they think. If something bad happens to them, like a child, they think that God is punishing them for some wrongdoing. Because most Mexicans are baptized at birth they are firmly rooted to one religion. That religion teaches strict adherence to religious doctrine that expresses a wrathful God.*

*So, a disability is a punishment. It says to society that you have transgressed. It is something that needs to be hidden from society. So the handicapped person is kept in the shadows. Thankfully, that crippled philosophy is slowly dying here in Mexico. Yes, there are two types of spinal cord injuries. The cervical injuries are usually related to diving accidents. The lower back injuries are sustained by accidents, many times in an automobile.*

*I want to emphasize that Mexicans are always ready to assist someone who is disabled. It is amazing how when you need to go up some steps, two Mexicans come to help you and that attracts others. Soon, you are being carried up the steps by eight strong Mexicans and everyone is laughing and having a good time. They will also tell you that when you*

*want to go down the steps they will be there to help you. When you are baptized in that kind of humanity in is extremely difficult to go anywhere else.*

Consequently, most handicapped were put in a back room hidden away. Those who did venture out, often out of the necessity to eat, did so with little or no medical equipment, no crutches, no wheelchairs and no braces. The blind would walk around begging, often led by a younger member of the family.

I remember one boy in Cuernavaca about 12 years old who was called "The Crab" because of the way he ambulated. He had a piece of tire that he sat on and one atrophied leg bent at the knee in front of him and the other behind him. He used his arms to pick up his body and swing himself forward to the next seated position. I remember another man who used to go around crawling on his hands and knees. He used wooden blocks for his hands and rubber tire to protect his knees.

One paraplegic I met in the state of Tabasco who had a tiny store and he conducted business lying on a mattress. It was said that the mattress had a hole cut in it with a bucket underneath.

I also remember a young paraplegic named Judith whose parents owned a circus. She had a shiny new Everest & Jennings wheelchair and when she saw my hand controls she showed them to her father. He asked me if I would buy a set for her the next time I went to the United States. I did and he bought her a brand new car. It was very liberating for her. She was extremely happy.

Unfortunately, she was an exception to the rule. Those who were handicapped in those days lived a very miserable existence. Life expectancy was not great for them. Spinal cord injury was a death sentence in those days. They usually lasted for four or five years and then died of some infection, usually caused by pressure sores. Lack of proper health care insured that their future was dim. Bob and I often commented about how lucky we were to be from the United States.

### **The Present – 2009**

When I moved to Mexico in 2005, I was very interested in seeing how the plight of the handicapped had changed after 42 years. In the United States I had witnessed and participated in the first signs of activism by our community during the 1960's. We lobbied local, state and federal governmental agencies for accessibility in all aspects of the word. On July 26, 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act. It was a great step forward and *Total Inclusion* was now seen as a partial victory.

I was hoping that some of this progress had also been realized in Mexico. I moved to a tiny village [Isla Aguada] on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico in the state of

Campeche on the Yucatán Peninsula. The village at a population of around 5,000 inhabitants. Only two streets were paved and the rest of them were all sand.

It was very easy to get the power chair stuck in the sand. I would then have to sit there until someone would come along who was strong enough to push me out.

There is a boy with cerebral palsy about 18 years old who lives about three houses down from me. Someone has built a concrete ramp so he can get out of his house and into the street. The only problem is, he has a manual wheelchair and he cannot push it through the sand. Basically, his life consists of watching television and sitting in the doorway watching the dogs chase the cars down his street.

There is another young man who is a diabetic and a double amputee. He sleeps in the house by the dock where they pack fish. He plays the guitar beautifully but he spends every waking moment begging for money so he can buy alcohol. Sometimes, he is lying on the sand passed out by the side of the street and he is oblivious to everything.

There is a beautiful little girl about six years old who has cerebral palsy. She used to live here, but now the mother has moved to the city so the little girl can get some therapy.

About three months ago, we helped her get her first wheelchair. She had been dragging herself on the floor up until that point. There is a woman, a double amputee, here who is about 40 years old and she has a homemade motorbike vehicle with a platform that she pushes her wheelchair upon.

She can actually drive this vehicle from her wheelchair. It has an awning to protect her from inclement weather. This vehicle is loaded with candy, chips, popcorn, fresh fruit, cold drinks, and tamales. During the day she goes around the village selling her products.

The nearest city, Ciudad Del Carmen, has approximately 350,000 people. I was not surprised to find handicapped parking at places like Sam's Club, VIPS, Dominos Pizza and Kentucky Fried Chicken. After all, they are American companies and I think we owe a debt to gratitude to them for introducing not only handicapped parking but accessibility into their buildings and their bathrooms.

Some of the very large department stores do make an attempt at handicapped parking. They set parking sites aside that are designated for the handicapped. The only problem is, the sites are much too narrow and if you have a handicapped van they are impossible.

In Ciudad Del Carmen there are two streets where they have installed wheelchair ramps at the intersections. One street named Donaldo Colosio was remodeled about five years ago and it was done correctly. The engineer replaced all the sidewalks and made them wheelchair traversable. He installed curb cuts and marked crosswalks at all intersections. The center of the boulevard has a curbed median and he made curb cuts with crosswalks at convenient locations.

The other street is in the downtown area and it violates all regulations and even puts into question the sanity of the engineer. There is one particular corner that has a curb cut and

because the sidewalk is only about 16 inches wide, the wheelchair ramp is only 12 inches wide.

But wait, it gets better. Directly at the top of the 12 inch wheelchair ramp is a 2" x 2" steel signpost. At the top of the post is a blue sign with the white wheelchair logo. I have seen one paraplegic going around the city in his wheelchair in traffic because the all of the sidewalks are either non-existent, un-passable, broken, uplifted or blocked.

I saw another paraplegic who was going along the sidewalk for a short distance and he had to go across the very slanted sidewalk section. To keep from crashing into the street he grabbed hold of one sign post half way across, swung himself towards the buildings, let go and made a U-turn, grabbed another signpost and repeated his movements again until he was on level sidewalk. Another young lady with muscular dystrophy about 25 years old with a college degree in graphic design cannot leave her house because of the steps and the cars parked on the sidewalks in front of her house.

Although changes have been made in the past 42 years here in Mexico, there is still such a long way to go. I am amazed by the tenacity of the handicapped community in this country. They have to put up with so much and they have so little. Yet, they don't complain about their situation they just try to adapt to it and change that which they can change.

The Mexican handicapped organizations are in their infancy. And they only exist in the very large cities and what they do is rarely felt in cities like Ciudad Del Carmen. What they do is never felt in my village.

END