

Redcard Roberts

BBC producer shares his world with NAC

Amy Roberts

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Soft, white beaches. Azure waters. Tropical temperatures. Total relaxation.

For most of us, that's a vacation. But for London resident Jonathan Bell, it goes something more like this: Set alarm for early wake-up. Dress for often-arctic conditions. Struggle against icy, snow-covered sidewalks in a wheelchair. Spend exhausting day at a resort teaching disabled children how to use a sit ski.

It's what Jonathan has done for the last four years. And he's back in Park City now, doing it again.

Jonathan is a news producer for BBC Television, the largest broadcasting organization in the world. But his path to being an acclaimed journalist is filled with some painful bumps, and that's how he ended up becoming a volunteer adaptive ski instructor with the National Ability Center (NAC).

"I never planned to be journalist. I was an infantry soldier with the British Army for years, and that was the only career path I really considered for a long time," he says.

But in the fall of 1995, all that changed. Jonathan was on a night training mission preparing for deployment to Bosnia when a drunk driver plowed into his platoon. He and 15 other soldiers were seriously injured. Jonathan's spinal cord was severed and his legs were mangled by the impact of the car, which left him a paraplegic.

"Lying in the hospital ward with my new injured mates, the future seemed a bit grim, uncertain at least. I was no longer a tall, physically fit soldier. I was a wheelchair user. I had no idea what I was going to do."

A few years after his injury, Jonathan decided to try skiing again. He went to Breckenridge Resort in Colorado and learned how to use a sitting monoski. "A man who was also an adaptive skier saw me struggling to adjust to my ski and came over to help me. During the conversation, he told me about the NAC in Park City."

That encounter proved to be a life-changing moment for Jonathan, who now spends a good portion of each winter in Park City working with people who are trying to adjust to their new, disabled life. Something he can certainly relate to.

"I know exactly what they're feeling, and how apprehensive they often are. When they see me in the same kind of ski as them and they see what I can do in the ski and how much fun I have, it builds their confidence. I love watching other people with disabilities have these life-changing experiences."

He loves it so much that he lumps his entire year's allotment of vacation time together and even takes a few weeks of unpaid leave to make it happen.

"The BBC is very flexible and progressive and allows me to take all of my annual leave in one lump to do this because they recognize it's important to me. But more so, they understand how important it is to the kids I am able help."

And help he does. When I asked him for his favorite story about helping someone, he couldn't narrow it down to just one. "Every spinal-cord-injury story is dramatic. And every time you watch someone start out so timid and afraid and, by the end of the week, they're having fun and even talking about pursuing skiing competitively, it's rewarding. The NAC has so many amazing instructors. They will get anyone on the mountain, no matter how severe their disability and that's an extraordinary thing."

Possibly the only thing more extraordinary are the people like Jonathan who unselfishly bypass a sun-filled vacation spot for a snow-filled volunteer opportunity in hopes of making a difference.

Amy Roberts is a freelance writer, public-relations guru and globe-trotting thrill seeker. In a former life she worked in TV news, both as a reporter and sports anchor. She has bagged peaks on six continents, kayaked the Zambezi and Nile rivers, swam with great white sharks in South Africa and tracked mountain gorillas in Rwanda. She was once very nearly sold for 2,000 camels while traveling through Morocco.