

Setting out on a new life

One of the region's top musicians, Clarence Adoo, is coming to terms with life after a car crash.

He remains paralysed and insurance offers little comfort. His company told him: "Unfortunately, you're still alive."

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THIS time last year, Clarence Adoo was a top musician with all to play for. Today, turning a page in 12 seconds is a triumph – but he refuses to be downcast.

On August 19 last year, Northern Sinfonia trumpeter Clarence was driving down the A1 on his way to his brother's stag party. Asleep in the front passenger seat was Emma Forbes, the orchestra's marketing and PR assistant. At 4.10pm, somewhere near Retford, the unthinkable happened. Clarence can recall it in slow motion action replay . . . the car veering to the left, straightening out on the hard shoulder and then shooting over a bank. "The car somersaulted a couple of times and we both got a bang on the head which is probably when we broke our necks," he said. Clarence was conscious throughout.

He remembers asking Emma if she was all right and being relieved when eventually she replied. Someone ripped the bonnet off and sprayed the engine. In his fuddled state he thought it was car thieves. He remembers the doctor, a fellow motorist, asking if they could move their limbs. "I wasn't able to move anything but I assumed I'd broken my arms and legs. I wasn't in any particular panic."

They were cut free, taken to hospital in Bassetlaw and later transferred to the spinal injuries unit in Sheffield. Emma has made a full recovery. Clarence was not so lucky. Six months after the accident he remains almost completely paralysed. He has movement in his neck and a little in his shoulders. Nothing more. A week ago he was transferred to the spinal injuries unit in Hexham, where he will remain until a life outside is made possible.

In almost every sense it is a tragedy that one of the region's top musicians should find himself in this situation. The talented and brilliantly tutored hands lie dormant on his knees. And yet, as I discovered when I spoke to Clarence against a babble of hearty hospital banter and daytime TV, he refuses to see it that way. The buoyant personality which made him a popular orchestra member remains intact.

He describes his predicament lucidly and with amused detachment. He believes it helped that the gravity of his injuries dawned gradually. Initially he had been intent on getting to his brother's wedding a week after the crash. "I said I'd be prepared to go in a wheelchair if necessary. "Obviously I didn't understand the implications of my injuries at that time. "I used to have vivid dreams where I was playing tennis or wandering the streets of Sheffield with my brother. I thought they were true so I couldn't have thought I was paralysed."

On his 35th birthday, he underwent surgery. Only when things started to go wrong and he was admitted to intensive care did he begin to realise the extent of the damage.

"You can't absorb all the situations you will come across straight away.

"What brought it home most clearly was when I got up off the bed for the first time to have a ride in a wheelchair.

"I remember that as soon as my head went slightly off centre, my body started to fall out of the chair. I went through the usual process of trying to stop myself but nothing happened.

"That was the first time I experienced my body not reacting to any of the signals from my brain."

His religious faith is one thing which has kept him going. He went to Sunday School as a child and it was in The Salvation Army that he was introduced to music by his foster parents, picking up a cornet at the age of six.

"Just before I went into intensive care the second time, when I had stopped breathing, I remember saying to God that I couldn't do tricks like that in my situation and I'd have to hand everything over to him.

"I remember a clear voice saying in future my life would be more fulfilled. I remember wondering how that could be when I couldn't move a muscle.

"But already I feel things are starting to fall into place. The support from friends, from people in the orchestra, has been amazing."

John Summers, chief executive of the Northern Sinfonia, has promised to retain Clarence's services, perhaps as an education and outreach worker because he is good with children. That, says Clarence, is a weight off his mind. In the meantime, life has become a re-learning process, a series of obstacles which Clarence chooses to regard as challenges.

"In Sheffield they taught me to do page turns with an implement you hold in your mouth. At first it took me 20 minutes to turn one page and that was very frustrating.

"Then I thought, 'Hold on, what I'm doing is very difficult. If my friends tried it they would all find it difficult'. I can do it in 12 seconds now. These things mean a lot to me. I'm trying to be positive." He refuses to accept that further

mobility isn't possible even though he has been told it is unlikely. "Everyone is different," he insists. "They were surprised when I got back my slight shoulder movement." You can see that Clarence was brought up to have a certain resilience. His real parents came to England for his father to further his career. Ten years and five children later, they decided to go back to Ghana. Clarence was four. The intention had been for the children to join their parents later but an unsettled political situation meant it never happened. The Adoo brood was brought up by foster parents in Essex. Clarence has always regarded himself as having two sets of parents, although both his father and foster father are now dead.

Asked by the deputy head at school what he was going to do with his life, young Clarence said he would be a musician. The teacher told him to be realistic. "It had the same effect on me as the consultant in Sheffield saying three months ago that I had to be realistic. People saying I can't do something is the biggest incentive I can have for doing it."

After school, Clarence studied at the Royal College of Music where his talent and ambition grew in tandem. With a grin, he confesses that he wanted to be the best trumpeter in the world until he heard Wynton Marsalis and realised he would have to settle for second best. He played with Courtney Pine's Jazz Warriors for five years and freelanced for various orchestras, including the Northern Sinfonia. When the Sinfonia asked him to join permanently in 1992, he jumped at the chance. For a professional musician, playing music is almost akin to breathing. Clarence plays in his head and sustains himself listening to cassettes on a machine he is striving to operate without help.

When the orchestra played in Huddersfield, he managed to get to a rehearsal, revelling in the live sound after months of recordings. He hasn't given up hope of playing again - even if it is with a computer. Clarence has decided to stay in the North-East where he has friends and the promise of a job. The quality of life for him here, he believes, is better than in London but there's much to be done. It's a new life he's embarking on. He has come to realise since his accident that the best available aids for the disabled are extremely expensive. Clarence wasn't insured as well as he thought.

A clause in his car insurance promising a pay-out if he lost his legs didn't apply because he still has his legs. "Unfortunately you're still alive," said the person on the phone when he inquired about a life insurance policy. That's the bad news. The good news is that an appeal, aimed at raising £50,000 to help him lead a normal life, has been launched.