



My story is anything but banal. I would like to share it with you because it gives meaning to the words determination, hope, and mutual assistance. If I had given up, this story would have ended on Friday, 28 October 1994.

At that time, I was in China in the Yunnan province. Under contract with Oxfam-Québec, I had been contracted to identify small income generating projects for a group of Karen women. My colleague and I were almost arrived at destination when our car struck another vehicle. In a few seconds, everything flared up. I remember trying to remove my clothes, but to no avail. I was a living torch, my skin crackled with a pungent odour of burning flesh. I beat the odds after surviving third-degree burns on almost 50 per cent of my body.

During the following two weeks, prior to the arrival of the air ambulance from Montreal, I remained without treatment or almost, moving from one hospital to another, and this in a world where Mandarin was the dominant language. I was first transported to a small hospital in Dali. I remember being in a large room, with an arc lamp covering my body from shoulders to knees. When the lamp was off, my skin would crust. When turned on, thus releasing heat, my flesh oozed. I was unable to communicate. At the end of a period which seemed to me like an eternity, I was transported to Cumming, the capital of Yunnan where I found some comfort. Indeed, several Americans live there, and I could express myself and make myself understood in English.

I was rapidly declining, but I never stopped fighting. Infected and about to pass away, I continued to fight. The treatments were definitely very painful. I was scrubbed without painkillers, which involved removing charred skin. I remember having asked that my suffering be alleviated. The answer was unequivocal: no! My accident was part of my destiny, the pain included.

Four days had passed since my accident, but nobody in Quebec caught news of it. I remember requesting a transfer to Hong Kong as soon as possible, but my efforts derailed. Indeed, to make matters worse, I found myself entangled in various Quebec authorities' bureaucratic maze. Finally, a week after my accident, I was transported to Hong Kong.

My survival remains a mystery for many, the first being me. On 12 November 1994, I finally passed through the doors of the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, and I was led to the burned victims unit. Was I thinking about death? I don't recall. I was just glad to see my mother's face. However, my situation was critical because burns that normally would have required a rapid response had been left without care for too long of a period. A few hours upon my arrival, the fever reached a phenomenal level. I was quickly sent to the operating room. Time was running out.

The Hôtel-Dieu surgeons took only three days to scrub and perform transplants. On 16 November 1994, I fell into a deep coma. My lungs ceased to function. Connected to a respirator, I regained consciousness on 6 January 1995. The following two years were devoted to my rehabilitation. I had to relearn everything. Doctors wanted to amputate my right hand. I said "no", and thanks to the hard work of my occupational therapist, it is fully functional. And despite my condition, I gave birth to a child in 1998. A miracle!

For several years, people called on me to meet other burn victims, mainly women as they had to cope with the loss of their physical integrity in a world where physical beauty reigns. This is how I came up with the idea of setting up a non-profit organization. In 2004, Entraide Grands Brûlés was born, an initiative of Sophie Sureau, Léo LaSalle and myself. Today the organization is ten years old. Its motto being: Pay it forward!

This difficult period allowed me to discover the courageous, resilient, and confident woman who lives inside of me, and to learn several life lessons. Despite any difficult situations, we should never give up. Hope lives in each of us and keeps us strong in the face of suffering. And just as Entraide Grands Brûlés, we should give back, not lose hope, because without it, we lapse into indifference, fatalism, even cynicism. We are all called upon to build a better world. And, my wish is for my son to be witness of a world where justice and fairness prevail.