

A sporting accident left Colin Javens paralysed, but that wasn't going to stop him pursuing his childhood dream

Driving Ambition

His sense of adventure had altered Colin Javens's life beyond recognition. Now he would use it to bring hope to thousands | BY ANTHEA ROWAN

IT WAS A balmy July day in 2000 and students Colin Javens, Ali Gray and Sam Martin were standing on Ryde seafront in a happy mood.

The friends from Harper Adams University College, Shropshire, had just navigated the Solent in Sam's tiny dinghy. The four-mile journey from Portsmouth, near Sam's Hampshire home, to the Isle of Wight would have required skill and some courage at the best of times, but it was Cowes Week and the Solent was teeming with yachts and speedboats.

Feeling pumped-up, Colin, a 19-year-old mountaineer from Hereford, wasn't ready for the fun to end. Looking over the harbour wall at the sea, he thought to himself, "I'm going to dive in."

Before his friends could stop him, he had plunged into the muddy water. After several seconds he resurfaced—but was floating face down. The mud had disguised a low tide and Colin

had smashed his head on the seabed.

In hospital, doctors told him he'd broken his neck. Tests revealed he was almost totally paralysed below his shoulders and would be confined to a wheelchair for life.

Colin couldn't accept that his days of adventure were over. He was particularly upset that he'd probably never use his car again. "I'd driven through the Australian outback by myself in my gap year," he remembers. "I couldn't face losing that freedom."

One of his childhood dreams had been to drive from Britain down the length of Africa to Cape Town. "If I'm not going to let disability rule my life," he told himself, "now's the time to make the dream come true."

His first priority was to return to college, which he did, completing his degree in 2003. Then the business of planning the epic journey began.

Most daunting was funding a vehicle

that he could drive. Fortunately, Colin's mission attracted sponsors. He bought a Land Rover and a Hemel Hempstead company specialising in disability vehicles fitted it with controls and ultra-light power steering that he could operate using the tiny movement in his forearms.

Colin still needed to assemble a five-strong support team for the journey, including potentially costly medical assistance. Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Buckinghamshire, where Colin had received rehabilitation treatment, provided a doctor, Chris Parsons. Colin's friends made up the rest of the group, including Richard Wood, a trained mechanic.

The 22,000-mile journey across 12 countries would take a huge toll, not least because Colin's body could no longer properly regulate temperature and extreme heat could prove fatal. But he was spurred on by pledges of £100,000 (to go to spinal-injury research) and his desire to reassert his independence. Last November, five years since his injury, he was ready.

Initially, the convoy made trouble-free progress through Europe. Colin adjusted well to the ten-hour driving stints, the lack of home comforts and having to sleep on an uncomfortable camp bed in the back of his vehicle.

Then, one evening at an Italian campsite, Colin spilt a mug of tea in his lap. He couldn't feel any pain, but he had suffered third-degree burns—enough to cause permanent damage if exacerbated by hours in the driving seat. "Great," thought Colin, "two

years of planning and I've brought everything to a halt after two weeks."

Fortunately, the burns were confined to the tops of his legs so, with care, Colin could still sit down. Though plagued by headaches—a reaction to the injuries—he continued driving.

But by the time the convoy reached Libya, the wounds had become infected and, in the searing 45-degree C heat, Colin could smell the rotting flesh.

THE TEAM MADE the decision to rest in Aswan in the hope that the wounds would heal. Colin had to lie in his tent all day, every day—and by late morning the heat of the surrounding desert was unbearable. Though his team cooled him down with a mist spray, the experience was exhausting.

After two weeks, however, Colin had recovered enough to continue. Summoning all his strength, he navigated his vehicle—on what were often pothole-ridden tracks—through Egypt, Sudan and on to Ethiopia.

Reaching the Kenyan border on schedule, the team were nervous. The area they were about to travel through was plagued by bandits and the convoy would be easy pickings. It was important not to hang around.

Colin drove as fast as he could, but the condition of the road deteriorated so much that his body began to spasm. He lost control of the vehicle and the steering wheel spun free. "Oh God!" he exclaimed to deputy expedition leader Ben Matthews, "I've broken it."

After Richard's makeshift repairs,

Colin was able to continue driving, but only at 15mph. What was supposed to be a five-hour dash turned into a nine-hour crawl. The team escaped detection, but they were forced to spend the night camped in the bush.

Yet Colin wouldn't allow himself any self-pity during the trip—the visits he made to local paralysis victims made sure of that. Reaching Tanzania, he met a 60-year-old called Pricilla, who could do little more than nod and shrug. She lived in a hut with no access to medical supplies—let alone the ramps and adapted bathrooms Colin enjoyed at home. "People were telling me I was an inspiration," says Colin. "But Pricilla had real strength."

The journey continued on through Zambia, Botswana and into South Africa until, after 164 gruelling days on the road, Colin arrived in Cape Town on April 17 this year.

As well as being the first person with his disabilities to drive the length

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of Africa, Colin's exploits had caught people's imaginations and donations now topped £430,000. "I popped a champagne cork that hit Ben square between the eyes and everyone collapsed into laughter," recalls Colin.

THIS SEPTEMBER, Colin and his Land Rover were on the road again, accompanying a Land's End to John o'Groats bike ride to raise more money. "My aim is to help fund a cure for paralysis," he says. "That may never happen, but at least I'll have shown that serious spinal injury needn't end your life."

For more information visit www.drivinghome.co.uk.

YOU'RE NOT TOO OLD TO GO OVER MY KNEE



A concerned German mother asked social workers to talk to her daughter about her loose morals—then revealed that the young delinquent was 68 years old. The unnamed mum, 92, from Hildesheim, Lower Saxony, complained to her local social services' youth department that her offspring was "uncontrollable and immoral with men" after discovering she had a boyfriend. Officials pointed out that

the daughter was 50 years too old to qualify for state intervention and sent the local police round to settle the dispute instead.