

17 Years After Crippling Accident, Struggling to Rebuild a Life

By ROJA HEYDARPOUR

One day in 1988, Derick Graham was 180 feet underwater when he found himself trapped in the Caribbean Sea without air.

His oxygen had run out.

Fortunately for Mr. Graham, the experience didn't end his life. But it did change it, radically and irrevocably.



Mr. Graham said a broken pressure gauge was to blame. It showed that he still had adequate oxygen, though he did not. Still, he was able to surface on his own and clamber aboard his fishing boat.

Believing that his brush with calamity was behind him, he went home and fell asleep.

An hour later, he woke paralyzed.

His girlfriend at the time took him to the hospital, and he was placed in a recompression chamber, but there were permanent injuries to his brain and spine from having surfaced too quickly.

"At first, if you take a pin and stick me, I don't know the dull side from the sharp side," he said.

Mr. Graham, 52, was a fisherman, which in his hometown, Clarendon, Jamaica, meant deep-sea diving. Each day, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., he would dive into the Caribbean Sea in search of lobsters and snappers.

A year and a half after his accident, Mr. Graham still believed he would return to his old job, his old life. "If the policeman get shot, don't



Seth Wenig for The New York Times

Derick Graham of Clarendon, Jamaica, a fisherman disabled at sea in 1988, moved to New York to try to provide for himself and his children.

In 2001, he moved to New York City with the hope of finding a job. His goal was to support not only himself, but also his children, three sons and four daughters living in Jamaica and in England.

He went to an employment agency in Queens, but it was unable to place him because of his disability; he needed to be able to stand on his feet for hours at a time for the positions he sought.

The agency referred him to the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of the seven charities supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Within two days, it found him a job upholstering salon chairs in Flushing, Queens.

"He really stands out," said Stacy-Ann Robinson, his job coach at the bureau. "That's why I want to help him. He's genuine." Ms. Robinson said she was struck by Mr. Graham's desire to help his children when he needs help himself.

Until early September, Mr. Graham lived in the attic of a house in Corona, Queens, with seven other people and many more cockroaches. Mr. Graham received an eviction notice after the house was condemned because the landlord had illegally built extra rooms in the basement. The caretaker of a blind old man who also lived there offered Mr. Graham

a room in her house in Canarsie, Brooklyn, for \$400 a month.

He rises at 3:15 a.m. for a three-hour commute to and from work each day — he takes four buses and two trains — and he cannot pass the time reading because he is illiterate.

His new basement room has one window that opens to a fluorescent-lit hall and is filled with the sharp scent of disinfectant. The floors are a shade of gray, and the walls are white and bare. His wooden bed is low to the ground, with matching nightstands on each side. Until recently, it was covered with thin floral sheets and no comforter.

Mr. Graham now takes literacy classes twice a week after work. He hopes to be able to make more money soon, but he is having trouble paying for transportation to class. He also wants to pay off the tuition owed to his son's high school in Jamaica so that his son can receive his diploma and move on to study engineering at a trade school.

Ms. Robinson is trying to find Mr. Graham a room closer to his job and is looking into programs for international students for his son, in the hope that he can move to New York to live with his father.

Meanwhile, she and her agency have been trying to help Mr. Graham in other ways. She used \$156.08 from

Previously recorded	\$2,804,756.49
Recorded Thursday	\$110,035.21
Total	\$2,914,791.70
Last year to date	\$3,171,773.36

he go back to work?" he asked. "That's me."

But even after all that time, he could barely move his right leg, and his other limbs were partially numb. He tried to resume fishing, but his earnings were meager, since his disability impeded him and his pay was based on the size of his catch.

the Neediest Cases to buy him a comforter and a winter coat. Though these are little things, they are important to Mr. Graham, small comforts that enable him to remain focused on the effort to rebuild his life.

Above all, Mr. Graham wants to be able to support his children.

"I think about my children all the time," he said.