Scott likes to point out the irony of the name of his hometown, Alpha. “The beginning.” After living in various parts of the country, he had to return to this town to begin again.

“I’m 51 years old. Did eight years in the military. I worked a lot of jobs, from construction, quarry work, mason, stair builder, truck driver. You name it, I’ve done it.” And he has all the scars to show for it. “Basically, my body just started falling apart. Because for years, I didn’t have insurance to take care of my body.”

Other than the accidents, there was nothing out of the ordinary about Scott’s younger years. One of four children, growing up in New Jersey in the 1960s, he performed well in school, but never liked it much and didn’t have any interest in college. Instead, he joined the Army-National Guard and was deployed a few times to help victims of floods and other natural disasters, before returning to civilian life in 1989. Scott fell in love with and married a woman from Venezuela, and he says, “I gained a lot of weight because she was a real good cook.” At the same time, he was working at a quarry six or seven days a week from 7:00 a.m. until sometimes 7:00 p.m. Their relationship suffered as a result of the long hours, and both the work and the weight gain began to seriously impact his quality of life. He and his wife “grew apart” and divorced after seven years.

During the 20 years between military service and unemployment, Scott worked various physical jobs, such as delivering roofing and construction supplies to work sites, including heavy sheetrock. “I remember starting at 5:00 in the morning and working until 9:00 at night. ... Two sheets might average 100-250 pounds. I would have to load them onto the truck, then take them off and transport them on a dolly, then pile them up in the room where they were going to be used. ... One of
the hardest jobs I ever did was delivering sheetrock.”

Scott traveled a bit after his divorce—spent some time in Texas and Florida. But when he was laid off in 2008, he returned to New Jersey with a multitude of health problems—diabetes, resultant neuropathy in his foot, and a host of orthopedic problems, including seven degenerated disks. “I was in so much pain every day that on a scale of 9 to 10, I was at about a 9 1/2 - 10 every day.” He turned to his parents for help, and they welcomed him into their home. “If I didn’t have my folks, I’d be out on the street.”

When his unemployment ran out, Scott applied for General Assistance (welfare), which is when he finally qualified for Medicaid and was able to see a physician. After examining him, the doctor encouraged him to apply for Social Security Disability. It took two and a half years to be approved.

During that two and a half years, Scott lived with his parents and survived on $210/month from the Board of Social Services. His vehicle was repossessed; he could not afford to purchase even clothing, let alone any luxuries beyond that. “It was very humbling to go from $800 a week take home, to receiving less than that in a month.”

Now, on disability, Scott receives just shy of $1,400 per month after the government takes out money to pay for his medical insurance. His left shoulder “feels like someone’s sticking a hot poker or an ice pick in my neck.” And when it acts up, it hurts for days, making it nearly impossible for him to even sleep.

Long past the days of sledding accidents and traveling, Scott has now turned his attention to more reflective, spiritual endeavors. He attends Bible study every Wednesday night, to learn “anything I can learn about God.” He tries to focus his energies on being the best person he can be, and believes that a big part of that is weighing your words very carefully—recognizing a very real power of words to heal or to hurt. “Out of your mouth comes either blessing or cursing.”

Interview conducted December 19, 2011.

“[I]f I didn’t have my folks, I’d be out in the street.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Visit LSNJ’s website, www.LSNJ.org, for general information about Legal Services or the Poverty Research Institute page for detailed reports about poverty in New Jersey. For more information about your legal rights, visit LSNJLAW.

FOR HELP: Through its statewide, toll-free hotline, 1-888-LSNJ-LAW (1-888-576-5529), Legal Services offers telephone advice to people who have been unfairly denied cash benefits, food stamps, or rental assistance, as well as certain health programs, including Medicaid/NJ Family Care, Charity Care, and PAAD. You may also apply for services online at https://lsnjlawhotline.org or contact a Regional Legal Services program for help.

TO MAKE A DONATION: For information on how to donate to Legal Services, visit LSNJ.org.