



Clockwise from left:

- Sitting alone in a local soup kitchen, Pineau takes a break from playing piano to eat. After the removal of his brain tumor, Pineau lost his sense of taste, “I only eat to live,” said Pineau.
- A photo of Pineau’s daughter Jacqueline is nailed to the wall above the piano Pineau practices at regularly.
- Although no longer religious, a cross hangs on the wall in Pineau’s apartment as a constant reminder that things will one day get better.
- Pineau plays piano wherever he’s invited. At the local soup kitchen, Pineau plays in return for a warm meal and a place to spend his day.



Not Buckled Up

Photos and Story by Topher Seguin

Sitting alone in a large dusty room, Sylvin Pineau wishes he had more to call his own. He sleeps on a bare mattress, shivering at night. He can't afford to turn the heat up. Pineau doesn't own too much, pawning off things in the last 15 years worth any money. He goes out to soup kitchens at least twice a day to eat, and spends most of his time wondering “what if?”

Pineau worked as a mechanic for Via Rail, and on October 15, 1986 while driving late at night from work in Toronto, he crashed and demolished his car.

“I woke up one month later in Kingston General Hospital. I was in really bad shape. My head was pounding and that's when the nurse told me I went through the windshield at 80mph, my head felt like it was the size of a pumpkin.”

Staring at a long road to recovery, Pineau soon found out that the injuries he sustained were far worse than he ever imagined. The whole left side of his temple was missing, leaving just a thin sheet of skin between his brain and the outside world.

Thinking that it would help with recovery, the doctors arranged for a piano to be placed in Pineau's room. “Playing piano was always easy for me, but when you're seeing double, nothing's easy,” said Pineau.

On December 2, 1986, Pineau and his wife Vicky had their first daughter. “I couldn't be there because of my surgeries. But Jacqueline was born on the same day as me. All I remember was thinking ‘30 years old, what a special gift.’”

Soon after his daughters birth, Pineau was released from the hospital. He couldn't remember how to do simple tasks, even being in a fast moving car made his head spin. Living life with a brain injury wasn't going to be easy, especially without an income.

“We weren't in good shape. I couldn't work and we had no money. Luckily Via Rail sent me some money for Christmas that year,” said Pineau.

Living off welfare since his injury, Pineau and Vicky decided that they needed to provide a better life for the family. Pineau started working at a car garage changing tires before being accused of stealing merchandise and being fired for it.

“After the garage I tried to work for a locomotive company, but it didn't last long because my memory was really bad. I washed trucks instead, but I wanted to do something important, something that would make some money.”

By 1995 they were living off welfare completely. But

things once again took a turn for the worst when the new Premier of Ontario Mike Harris was elected. Harris cut welfare, which made it nearly impossible for the family to live without another income.

“Around this time our daughter Jacqueline woke up one morning with a huge headache. We rushed her to the hospital and they ran tests and different scans. There was a tumour in the bottom of her skull. Eventually they had to send Jacqueline to Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto. Lots of people helped us when they could. They helped with paying the rent and even pitched in with the gas,” said Pineau.

Jacqueline passed away on December 16, 1995. Life at home was falling apart. Vicky blamed herself for everything, and took to a life of drugs, selling pills on the streets.

“I then found out I also had a tumour,” said Pineau. “It was too much for Vicky to handle so she never came with me for the appointments. My surgery was done quickly; it took 4 and a half hours to complete.”

Still trying to find a way to make life better at home, Pineau bought a computer, only to find out how big of a problem it would soon become.

“If only I could've seen the future, she used the computer for online sex. She met up with guys she found on the Internet and cheated on me. One of them was our neighbour. I didn't know about all of this at the time. Then when I did find out, she was gone. She took everything with her too, I was left with nothing and didn't know where to begin.”

Being told of a good place to start working towards getting better, Pineau was directed to the Quinty Brain Injury Association in Belleville, where he met Pam Ferrill. Ferrill has worked at the office as staff at the centre since the beginning. She did everything she could for him, showing him where he could go for meals and where he could go to get his laundry done.

“We even managed to find him an old keyboard to play on, he loved it. I think it was the first time in a while he had been able to play whenever he wanted. Sylvin would play at the centre every day and volunteered at all the meetings,” said Ferrill.

Now living in a small apartment straight across form the Brain Injury Centre, Pineau volunteers to play piano at different events within the community. “I don't live in the nicest area, and more than one point in my life I wanted to give up. One day I'll have a girlfriend, and a regular life. Like it's supposed to be.”



Unable to afford a car, an old motorcycle is Pineau's preferred method of travel.



Walking with a limp, getting up to the top floor is a daily struggle for Pineau. No longer having an income, Pineau will soon have to file for bankruptcy and move out of his apartment.