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Palermo shares inspirational message

Former umpire overcame paralysis after 1991 shooting

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Steve Palermo has experienced incredible triumph and unfathomable tragedy in a full life, but he doesn't describe himself as anything out of the ordinary.

"Look, this is the way it is," says the former big-league umpire who now supervises umpires for Major League Baseball. "All I'm doing is going out every single day like you all, brushing my teeth, putting on my clothes and just going through the paces of life."

If only it were that simple.

On July 7, 1991, while coming to the defense of two waitresses outside the Dallas-area restaurant he was dining at with friends, the then-41-year-old Palermo was shot in the back and the bullet pierced his spinal cord, paralyzing his lower extremities.

Two days after the shooting and emergency surgery, Palermo's wife, Debbie, and brother, Jimmy, relayed the news to Palermo that the neurosurgeon told them he'd never walk again.

He didn't believe it and he proved the doctor wrong three months later, when he walked onto the field at a Texas Rangers game three months later with crutches and leg braces.

These days, he walks with one small leg brace and a cane and goes around the country telling his story, uplifting and inspiring people with his story of hope and perseverance.

Palermo is embarking on a side career of motivational speaking, and he says he can't wait to share his experiences, thoughts and philosophy about life with others.

"I have done some speaking in the past, but it's been sporadic," Palermo says. "I've had a lot of requests to go out and tell my story for a movie or a book, but I like my private life to a certain degree, and a movie or a book would open you up to a great deal of public life."

But Debbie Palermo convinced Steve that his story could help people, and he reluctantly and humbly admits that he has received enough feedback to prove that claim.

"I'll get stuff like children saying, 'You cannot believe how this helped my dad. It's incredible what he's doing now. He's going through therapy, he's improved a great deal, he has the use of his hands now to the point where he can feed himself,'" Palermo says.

"I think a lot of people just take it for granted that they have all their faculties. I mean, I get up and walk to the refrigerator, grab something and it's not a big deal.

"But it *is* a big deal for people who are paralyzed and can't do these things. So if they come to listen to me speak and I can somehow motivate them, it's worth doing. I know I'm rock-headed, but it's really starting to sink in that it is helping people."

Big league umpire Jim Joyce, who worked on Palermo's crew during his umpiring days, agrees.

"Stevie's always been very good at motivational stuff, and I would say that even before the accident, he was pretty good at it," Joyce says. "A lot of it has to do with his personality. He's definitely an 'A' personality.

"With me, my son played football with a kid in Beaverton, Ore., who, on a tackle during a game, became a paraplegic. The first person I called was Steve, and through me, he gave the kid's family a lot of insight. I can tell you that it really did help.

"I think it takes a lot of courage to do what he's done with his life. It'd probably be easier to crawl into a hole and never come out again, but he's continued with his life and his work, and he's done it forcefully, too."

Palermo's method of motivational speaking isn't planned or contrived or written out or regimented.

"When I get up there to speak, I really don't exactly know what I'm going to say," Palermo says. "I don't know how it'll strike me with different audiences. But one thing I will say is that I'm always very explicit about the shooting. The people realize that it's all coming from my heart. I don't read from a script. They get it."

But the "it" that Palermo talks about isn't just a somber story of a man marrying a woman, getting shot five months later, watching as his wife became his primary caregiver and then starting the long road to grueling, painful and rewarding recovery that he still travels today.

There's also quite a bit of humor and good old-fashioned baseball talk.

"We'll do a whole Q&A section of the talk, and that triggers my mind with stories of what happened on the field," Palermo says. "That's when people realize, 'Wow, this guy's got a story for everything.'

"I tell them about situations, whether it's me yelling or getting yelled at by Billy Martin, you know, 'Yes, that really did happen,' and, 'Yes, this guy really did call me that.' Everybody's laughing because they know it's true. They can envision what it's like on the field."

San Francisco Giants manager Bruce Bochy, who was a player when Palermo was an umpire, says he's been impressed with how Palermo continues to be a force in and out of the baseball community.

"With what happened and how he's handled it, I think he's an inspiration for all of us," Bochy says. "In my dealings with him for umpires meetings, he's always upbeat and never had any sense of, 'why me?'"

"I think he's got a good story with what he's done with his life since the shooting. I think it's a moving story that he'll be able to tell very well. He's going to be good at it. I always enjoy talking to him."

And, as Palermo has found out, once you talk about baseball, everybody enjoys just sitting back and listening.

"The game is a great connector," he said. "It really ties people together. That's part of it and that's how I started, coming through the Minor Leagues, getting to the big leagues, being very fortunate at 26 years old when I started.

"I've really been fortunate with all of it. And then to talk about the shooting, the prognosis and the doctor saying it's going to be virtually impossible for you to ever walk again, and to be able to do what I'm doing now, I don't know what to say.

"I guess I have to say all of it was worth it."

[Doug Miller](#) is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.