

# **Br. Ghulam Irtiza Chughtai**

Interviewed by: Br. Abdulaziz Mian.

## ***Q. Can you tell me a bit about your background?***

**Br. Irtiza:** As you know my name is Ghulam Irtiza Chughtai. I married my wonderful wife Kehkashan in 1984 in England. I have a very responsible son Muhib Chughtai who is now 23 years old. We lost our younger son Zohaib in an accident. He was seven weeks old at the time.

I was born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan. I have four brothers and one sister. I completed my degree in Bio-Chemistry from the government college in Lahore. My Masters Degree in Administration was from Punjab University. I went to Salzburg, Austria for a degree in hotel management. I came to Canada in 1974.

## ***Q. I know you worked at the Sheraton Winnipeg and I remember seeing you play cricket. Tell our readers about your work and extracurricular activities?***

**Br. Irtiza:** Yes, you are right. I did work at Sheraton in the eighties. I also worked in many other prestigious hotels such as the Hilton, Hyatt, 4 Seasons and De La Chaudiere. I was the resident manager and head of various departments. If it was not for the accident, I would have been in Iraq working as the general manager for Sheraton Al-Rashid.

You are also correct about cricket. I love cricket. I played cricket regularly in Ottawa and played only a few games in Winnipeg. Now, I watch cricket regularly.

## ***Q. Is it possible to share with our readers how the accident happened?***

**Br. Irtiza:** We took a family trip to Kenora, Ontario on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1990. It was a beautiful summer's day when we were driving back to Winnipeg. I was driving within the speed limit. Suddenly, the car swerved to the right heading into the ditch due to a flat tire. I steered the car to the left to avoid the ditch. The car went out of control making a 360-degree turn and then it flipped over. Next, I remember my head was stuck in the steering wheel and I was unable to free myself. An ambulance arrived shortly after what seemed like an eternity. Before passing out I remember hearing "he is not going to make it".

## ***Q. What about your family at the time of the accident?***

**Br. Irtiza:** My five-year-old son sustained minor injuries. My seven-week-old baby was thrown out of the car into a ditch and my wife fractured her shoulder blade. I remember hearing my wife telling the paramedics to take our baby with them. A Good Samaritan searched for the baby who was lying in a ditch. She rushed our baby to the same hospital where I was taken. Later, the ambulance returned to pick up my wife and son.

## ***Q. I remember visiting you in the hospital. You were unconscious for days. What happened after you regained consciousness?***

**Br. Irtiza:** Yes, I regained consciousness six days after the accident when a doctor was examining me. He said, "I am afraid you will remain paralyzed for the rest of your life. You won't be able to move on your own." The words sounded very inhumane for someone who just regained consciousness. This is when I learned that my spinal cord was broken at level C5 and C6.

It took me three weeks before I could speak. My lungs were injured and even to this day they are only partly functional. My ribs were broken so a suction tube had to be inserted to extract the mucous. My whole body was in pain. I had trouble breathing and my muscles started degenerating. I saw no hope in sight.

Eventually, I found out that my baby did not survive the accident. "I was very upset with God. Why did he choose me for this ordeal? For many days I lost my faith in my Creator,"

***Q. After losing faith what was the turning point in your life?***

***Br. Irtiza:*** One day I saw a man in the hospital whose both legs were amputated. That day, I started to count my blessings. I started to beat the odds for my son and wife. I grew up without my father and I did not want my son to go through that pain. Despite losing a son and having lifelong injuries, my wife gave me rock solid support. I drew power from her strength.

I used to pray regularly before the accident. It took me almost two years to get back on track and say my prayers. I also performed my kaza prayers.

***Q. How long were you in hospital and what was returning home like?***

***Br. Irtiza:*** I was hospitalized for nine months. It was difficult to accept and adjust to my disability. It took months to make even a tiny progress. Even a simple task like learning how to hold a spoon was a big challenge..

***Q. I remember you saying doctors were not hopeful. What can you tell me about that?***

***Br. Irtiza:*** First responders said I will not survive. Allah made the way and spared my life. Then the doctors predicted that I would not be able to move my hands at all. I made constant efforts despite pain and once again Allah made the way. The doctors were amazed at my recovery.

***Q. What would you say about the healthcare system in Canada?***

***Br. Irtiza:*** There are pros and cons. I think it is good that they do not take pity on you. They help you with your self-esteem and self-confidence. On the negative, it takes months to get an appointment. I was going through unimaginable pain due to bedsores and there was nothing I could do. I had to wait for months to get treatment.

***Q. How are you trying to live your life now?***

***Br. Irtiza:*** I try to live a full and normal life. I traveled to Pakistan to visit my family where my brother had to build a ramp for my mobility. I encourage people to do their best. I try to participate in every community activity whenever I am invited or asked. My wife is always helping with bake sales at the Masjid. Some people think I sit around all day and do nothing. I surf the net and trade in mutual funds, which brings me some money. My wife puts me through painful exercises. When I complain, she says, "you have to be cruel to be kind".

***Q. Do you feel the community supported you?***

***Br. Irtiza:*** Yes and no. I had lots of visitors at the hospital. I know people were praying for my health and recovery. I felt the community failed me as a disabled person. There was no support in my rehabilitation and there was no support for my son. He had to grow up faster than his age to help me. Nobody took my son for an outing when they took their own kids. I also do not recall anyone asking if we needed help for shopping. I believe Islam teaches humanity and caring for others who need our help and that goes beyond praying for Him.

***Q. Any last words?***

***Br. Irtiza:*** I do not want people to take things for granted. What happened to me can happen to anyone. Count your blessings, believe in Allah, rely on your loved ones for strength, be patient but strong and do not give up.