

I hope to inspire others to take part in sport

I was paralysed BY A COLD

Gabrielle never imagined a common bug would change her life forever **Gabrielle Wright, 18, Papakura, NZ**



Dad, me, Mum and Felicity

Soaking in the hot bath, I hoped it'd soothe my sore back.

At 12 years old, my life revolved around playing netball for my school club, and I hoped to play in the national team.

'I must have pulled a muscle,' I told my mum, Vanessa, then 47.

A few days earlier, I'd had a mild cold, but thought nothing much of it. The next day, my back was still sore.

'Hop into the bath again, love. I'll rub on some anti-inflammatory cream afterwards,' Mum promised.

While getting in the tub, my legs started to feel really weak and tingly. And coming out of the bath to use the toilet, my legs felt strange. I couldn't wiggle my toes, and slowly my legs became completely numb.

What's happening to me? I panicked.

Trying to get off the loo, my legs suddenly crumpled and I collapsed on the cold tiles.

'Mum!' I screamed.

Thankfully, the door wasn't locked so Mum

and my dad, Clinton, then 43, came rushing in.

Dad gently scooped me up off the floor.

'Let's get you checked out. It could be a muscle spasm or a spider bite,' he said.

Mum took me to Emergency, while Dad stayed home with my little sister, Felicity, then nine.

After an MRI and lumbar puncture, I was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, an inflammation of the spinal cord which had caused paralysis from the waist down.

The doctor said the cold had likely caused a viral infection, and my immune system had overreacted to it, attacking my spine.

'You may never be able to walk again,' the doctor said. Shocked I'd been paralysed by a cold, I felt overwhelmed.

Will I ever be able to play netball again?

I wondered, devastated.

But I was determined to get back up and walk. Mum even quit her job in human resources so she could care for me.

Over the next five weeks, I underwent countless tests, and had plasma exchange therapy. It stopped the inflammation, but it couldn't undo the damage already

caused to my spinal cord.

My little sister visited me every night at the hospital.

'I miss you, I love you so much,' she said.

Lying in my hospital bed watching *Finding Nemo*, a quote from Nemo's friend Dory resonated with me. 'When life gets you down, all you gotta do is just keep swimming,' she says.

So that became my mantra. There were days when I couldn't stop crying, but I tried to focus on what I could do to get better.

Transferred to a children's rehab centre for eight weeks, I learned how to get dressed and use the

bathroom.

Coming home was bittersweet.

I'd left there 13 weeks ago on my feet. Now, I was returning in a wheelchair.

Going back to school was a bit scary too. 'I've missed so much. How am I going to cope?' I said to Mum.

'One day at a time,' she soothed.

For the next few years, I had physiotherapy in the hope I'd walk again. But, sadly, it wasn't successful.

I tried various wheelchair sports, including basketball and tennis.

Zooming around the basketball court, was so much fun. And shooting hoops, I felt like my old self again.

Still, I desperately missed netball.

At 15, I told Mum I wanted to get involved with netball again, so she suggested I try umpiring.

'It would be a chance for you to



At netball when I was younger

I tried to focus on what I could do to get better

AS TOLD TO ASTHA GUPTA



Me wheelchair racing



Umpiring at netball



show people you can do anything you set your mind to,' she said.

After passing a test on the rules, my local club agreed to let me umpire, using a sports wheelchair I could push fast enough to keep up with the players.

On my first day, the court was packed with people who'd come to watch, as I was the first person in New Zealand, and possibly the world, to umpire netball in a wheelchair. With butterflies in my stomach, I wheeled onto the court.

'You were amazing out there,' strangers commented. I enjoyed every minute of it!

As a little kid, I'd loved competing in 100m and 200m sprints. So I started wheelchair racing. Zipping across the track so fast, it was thrilling. And I hope to play wheelchair tennis at the 2024 Paralympic Games.

Docs say there is a 30 per cent chance I'll walk again, and that is my ultimate goal.

'No matter what we face, we will always find ways to keep pushing forward,' Dad tells me.

Last year, I won the Youth award in the Attitude Awards, which celebrate Kiwis living with disabilities. I hoped it would inspire others to get involved in a sport they love.

Although my life didn't go the way I planned, I'm making the most of it. ●

Have you overcome a shocking event? Tell us at that'slife@aremedia.com.au