



Don't put those bits on the skip mate, mam wanted those", Andy says, directing his army of willing helpers.

I'd managed to grab an hour with this human dynamo who is currently adapting and renovating his beloved bungalow with the help of friends and family, while also fitting in appearances

in *Emmerdale* as part of one of the soap's most talked-about current storylines.

"It's a madhouse at the moment," he says cheerily, "well, it's always a madhouse, but now more than ever."

Following a diving accident in 2006, it seemed unlikely that Andy would ever regain consciousness, let alone renovate

his own home several years later.

Medical opinion at the time insisted he would die, or at best, suffer severe brain damage. It was the belief of local experts and specialists, but it wasn't the belief of Andy and his family.

He had been on holiday in Goa with friends. "I was a really confident swimmer," he says. "I used to swim

Andy Walker talking up life

As *Emmerdale*'s controversial storyline on assisted suicide ramps up the negatives on disability, the show's other wheelchair-user, Andy Walker tells **Annie Makoff** he's doing all he can to bring his positive life view to the screen

competitively and up until then I'd swum every day of my life since I was born. I must have dived nearly a million times."

Deciding to take a dive whilst his friends were at the local bar was nothing out of the ordinary. But something went wrong: Andy hit his head mid-dive and broke his neck in three places.

Placed on a stretcher made from Coca-Cola bottles and masking tape, Andy was taken to hospital in a make-shift van. It was there, amidst farm animals wandering freely around the wards, that doctors gave a grim prognosis.

"They stopped treating me at one point," Andy recalls. "They found out I

"I love being within the disabled community now. I haven't embraced them, they've embraced me and I'm pleased to be a part of it"

was trying to get to a specialist treatment unit in the UK so they refused to treat me. They said I was going to die, and I had no chance." Despite being advised to say goodbye to family and friends who had flown to India to be with him, Andy refused to give in.

"I was on death's doorstep," he says, "but I knew deep down I'd survive. It was like someone was saying to me 'you'll be all right, kid'. I played rugby so I knew I was strong enough. It broke my parents' heart because I've always been a bit of a Jack-the-lad character, but it didn't break my heart – I knew I had to focus on my family to get me through."

After eight months of intense treatment in a specialist hospital in Sheffield, it was time to adapt to his new life as a tetraplegic.

"I wasn't exactly skipping in the daisy fields, but I knew that life isn't just about being able to move your arms and legs."

Andy's life may have changed dramatically since 2006 – he was an IT consultant and ran a rugby league shop – but now, five years on, Andy is as busy and as happy as ever.

If he's not fundraising for spinal injury charities like Aspire or the Back-Up Trust, he's out sailing or paragliding or giving one-to-one support to people going through similar experiences. He is also vice-chairman of Ace Centre North, an assistive technology service, ("it's only because I can communicate, I'm just the voice, nothing else," he insists) and he works closely with local

organisations that offer supportive living and promote independence.

"Being on *Emmerdale* is just a tiny, tiny part of all the stuff I'm involved in," Andy says. "I'm dead busy all the time – I don't stop for two minutes. In that way, I'm just as active as I ever was before the accident, only this time I have a chair to drag around with me."

Andy, a "Jack the lad", a "typical Northerner", a "cheeky chappy", isn't someone to take things too seriously. He talks for England – or rather Manchester – he chatters away without stopping for breath about his family whom he adores ("they're totally barmy: I come from a proper madhouse!") and he lovingly describes his friends who treat him just the same as they ever have.

"They write on my head, they steal my clothes, ya know, typical lad stuff – wind ups," he chuckles. "And now they call me 'chubby chops' because apparently I look dead fat on television."

Unlike most actors, Andy is "dead embarrassed" being on the TV. He doesn't watch episodes he's appeared in, analysing what he did wrong and he doesn't agonise over how he should have done things better. He's a live-for-the-moment kind of guy. His mantra is "what's next?" instead of "what if?"

"I really cringe seeing my ugly mug on the television," Andy laughs. "It's embarrassing and I get so much stick for it from my mates, but I love it. I think it's so barmy that they've let me loose on the TV!"

For all his humour, Andy's appearance on *Emmerdale* has a serious purpose. He plays Steve Kelly, a tetraplegic who meets Jackson Walsh (Marc Silcock) who became paralysed following a road accident last year. Regular *Emmerdale* viewers will know that Jackson struggled to accept his disability and hit rock bottom.



Above and left: Andy and Marc on set as the storyline develops



The plot hit the headlines earlier this year when it was revealed that Jackson will persuade mum (Pauline Quirke) and boyfriend Aaron Livesy (Danny Miller) to help him commit suicide.

It has raised serious concerns by campaigning groups who say that the assisted suicide plot gives out the wrong message to the public.

Yet Andy's character is the yang to Jackson's yin. Whilst Jackson cannot accept his disability, happy-go-lucky Steve tries to show him that he can still live a good life and enjoy himself.

"Steve is a really positive character," Andy explains. "He's a bit cheeky like me and he loves having a laugh. Steve tells him about electric wheelchairs and independence and having fun and he takes him down the pub and to a football game. At the same time, Steve gives him some home truths. I say on-screen exactly what I do in real life when I meet people who have become disabled following an injury."

Andy hopes that his character teaches people that even with a spinal injury, life can be worth living. "I can't

influence the storyline in terms of Jackson, but I fully support Steve Kelly's part in the show," he says. "After all, I campaign day in, day out, showing people that it's possible to have a fantastic life even if you are paralysed. So Steve is able to offer this as an alternative view. If he didn't, I wouldn't be able to play him."

Yet Andy admits that he wasn't sure about appearing on *Emmerdale* initially. Having been approached by ITV through his work with the Back-Up Trust, Andy believed he was joining as an disability adviser for Marc's character.

"I thought working on the set would give me the opportunity to do something nice for my family," Andy recalls. "I never watched *Emmerdale* but my mum, my nan and my sister love it, so I thought I could bring them along. When I found out that I was actually going to be cast I had second thoughts – it was out of my comfort zone. But my friends were saying 'practice what you preach, Andy', so I decided to give it a go. I auditioned for the part and I guess they liked me enough, because here I am!"

In the end, Andy's motivation behind appearing on *Emmerdale* wasn't for fame or for the new wardrobe he's been provided with, although he admits he loves the clothes and feels "dead smart in them", it was to

generate positive media attention about spinal injury.

"The last thing I wanted to do was throw my face around the newspapers because it's not about Andy Walker, is it?" he says. "It's about giving positive messages out. If my character inspires just one person with a spinal injury, then I've done what I wanted to do."

Nonetheless, playing a character so similar to himself isn't always easy. Marc's acting as Jackson is so believable that it brought up a lot of memories and emotions for Andy.

"It brought me back to the difficult days," he says. "And when I was talking to Jackson and saying 'you've got to stop feeling sorry for yourself mate' it was like I was saying it to the outside world – it was tough love. I think I even shed a tear."

“Steve is a really positive character. He's a bit cheeky like me and he loves having a laugh. I say on-screen exactly what I do in real life when I meet people who have become disabled following an injury”

Actually, even the severity of Andy's own injury didn't keep him down for long. Although his self-esteem and confidence was knocked and he had to adjust to a whole new way of life, being miserable just isn't in Andy's bones.

"I can't stand being miserable, me," he says solemnly. "I get depressed being depressed. I'd much rather be

depressed being happy. When I cry I'm like 'there's not much point doing that is there?' It hurts my eyes, does crying, so I don't do it."

Luckily, there's not much to cry about in Andy's life these days. As he says himself, he's busy being busy. He's going paragliding and skiing in the next few weeks and has already bumped himself up snow-covered mountains in his wheelchair.

Andy says he enjoys life more than he ever did. "I've done all sorts, I'm a Jack-of-all-trades, master of none," he jokes. "But who cares? I love being within the disabled community now. I haven't embraced them, they've embraced me and I'm pleased to be a part of it." ■

• Andy appears in *Emmerdale*, ITV1 Monday to Friday at 7pm with an extra episode at 8pm every Thursday.

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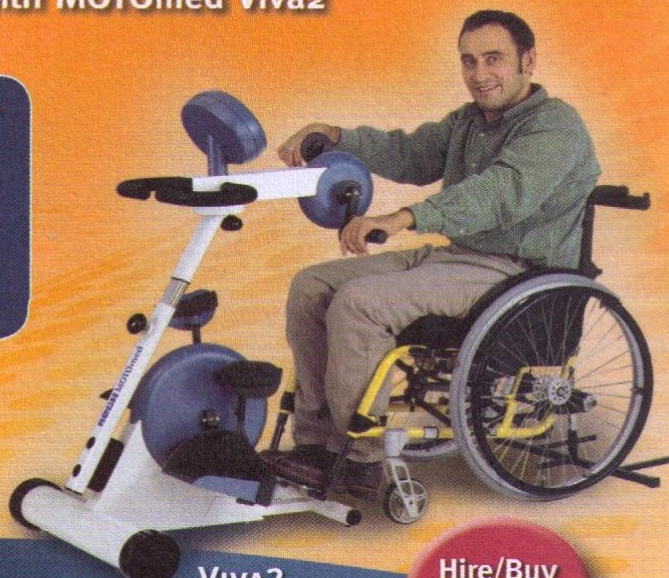
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