

The Patriot Ledger

Why he's the 'luckiest man in the world' after horrible burns maim him

Sue Scheible | January 7, 2025

NORWELL – Thirty-five years after the ghastly explosion inside a Walpole manhole that killed his coworker, utility worker Jim Pinkham doesn't just say he is lucky to be alive.

He tells stories of gratitude.

"There is some reason why I'm here and I'm thankful for whatever it is."

After hundreds of surgeries and ongoing therapy, he has been able to take care of his yard, cook, help others in his union leadership roles and find immense joy in his own family and five grandchildren.

"It's really amazing when you think about it,"

Pinkham says of his recovery, even as he continues to have serious medical problems and do therapy at home two days a week, just to walk with less pain. He also recently tried a new immunotherapy to deal with persistent squamous-cell tumors linked to the burns.

He was 32 when the accident occurred on Aug. 16, 1989. He had become an underground cable splicer for Boston Edison, now Eversource, in 1982 and was severely injured in the Walpole manhole explosion. John W. Lyon, 51, of Dedham, an inspector, was also burned and died five days later. "I think his body took most of the initial blow," Pinkham says.

90 percent of his body was burned; he was in a coma for more than four months

The Patriot Ledger reported at the time that he was burned over 90 percent of his body; only his hands and feet were not burned because of his boots and gloves. He was in an induced coma in intensive care at Brigham and Women's Hospital for four-and-a-half months, until New Year's Day, 1990 and first went home on Easter in 1990. He continued daily therapy for seven years.

News reports at the time credited quick-thinking fire and rescue workers and Boston's leading burn treatment methods for his survival.

Pinkham still keeps in touch with his lead physician from the early years of his surgeries: Elof Eriksson, chief of plastic and reconstructive surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital, who is now retired.

It was Eriksson who once said, "Jim's the only one that doesn't know he was burned."

The doctor was speaking about Pinkham's persistent ability to focus on what he could still do.

"That's what gets you through it," Pinkham says. "You can't think about the wounds that you have, or how you look. I feel I am the most luckiest guy in the world. I have my hands, my feet and can do everything I could do prior. Thank God for therapy."

'For me, this is the new normal'

Sometimes others seem more disturbed by his condition than he is. "People don't understand that to me, this is kind of normal . . ."

He continues to work hard every day to stay there.

Pinkham has been a member of the Utility Workers United Association of America Local 369 for 50 years. He also credits the union's support with his recovery and was recently awarded the Labor Guild's highest honor – the 2024 Cushing-Gavin Labor Award from the Labor Guild and Archdiocese of Boston for his outstanding service in the labor movement. Among other roles, he is chairman of the board of trustees for UWUA Local 369, located on Sagamore Road in Quincy.

The award was presented Dec. 6 at the IBEW Hall in Dorchester. UWUA National President James Slevin and the Most Rev. Richard Henning, archbishop of Boston, attended.

"It is such an honor to receive this award and to be part of this distinguished organization," Pinkham said at the award ceremony. "I am a proud 50-year union card holder. Without the support of so many, I would not be here. Thank you to everyone who helped me along my journey."

He graduated in 1975 from North Quincy High School

He has filled other key roles as well. For 15 years, he served as president of the Plymouth/Bristol Central Labor Council, representing labor in 26 communities throughout Southeastern Massachusetts. He was treasurer of the Brotherhood of Utility Workers Council and director of the Pilgrim Foundation Council, a nonprofit with a \$5 million endowment that provides funding for municipal projects and community programs in Brockton.

He also served on the executive council of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO from 2008 until he stepped down this year; he was a director for Members Plus Credit Union and a director for the South Shore Workforce Investment Board.

Pinkham, who grew up in Roxbury and Quincy, graduated in 1975 from North Quincy High School. He and his wife, Anne, met when they were 17 and 15 and were married at ages 20 and 18. When the accident occurred, they were living in Quincy; their two sons, Jason and Craig, were 8 and 12. Eventually, needing more space for his therapy and exercise, they moved to Pembroke and then in 2002 to Norwell, where he is a member of the board of registrars.

Jim and Anne Pinkham have been married for 48 years. Their older son, Craig, has four daughters, lives in Milton and followed in his father's footsteps. Their younger son, Jason, lives in Whitman and has a son.

A friendly, humorous man who makes conversation easily, Pinkham spoke openly about the medical details and biggest challenges of his recovery. At one point, he unpinned his prosthetic ears to show the impact of his surgeries.

He sobbed at his first look and then bounced back

Asked how he has managed to get used to the changes in his physical appearance, he said that he believes he adapted quite quickly after the initial shock. "What else could I do?" he says.



There is some reason why I'm here and I'm thankful for whatever it is."

In April 1990, he was allowed to go home over Easter weekend for the first time. In the hospital all the mirrors had been covered. He recalled looking at himself in a bathroom mirror for the first time at home.

The image he saw confirmed what he thought he had felt with his hands – his whole face was very different.

"It was a shock," he said. "I remember sobbing and then composing myself. I went out and told my wife and children that I didn't cry, but I did."

Later, surgeries would restore his nose, eyelids (burned off in the fire) and attempt a mustache.

Why he had surgery every year for 35 years

"I have had surgery every year for 35 years," Pinkham says matter-of-factly. In addition to skin grafts for wounds that would not heal, he has required ongoing treatments for rare skin cancers that can develop in burn tissue, and for skin ulcers.

Throughout it all, he has focused on "the job that needed to be done." He was able to resume playing golf, though he no longer plays. He learned to dress his own wounds and deal with leg wrappings.

He is especially proud that he never missed a hockey or baseball game in which his two sons were playing. And when he first came home, his doctors told his wife, "Treat him like you always have" and she has. "If I act like an idiot," I said, "You tell me."

On Jan. 15, he will have more surgery and then on Jan. 17, a skin debridement to remove dead tissue from his knees. His left forearm is the only place remaining on his body for grafting skin and that area is running out.

One of the harder adjustments has been the occasional reaction of strangers to his changed appearance.

Pinkham, who has an open manner, described how years ago he was in a checkout line at a grocery store and the woman in front of him had a toddler in a carriage. When the child pointed at him several times in curiosity, she pushed the child's arm down twice, and then pinched the child, who cried.

Why he feels 'luckiest guy in the world' after so much pain

He would prefer people ask about what happened to him.

"Normally I would say, 'Hi, how are you? I was in an accident, I was burned.' If people come up or ask, 'Were you burned?' I would much rather have that."

"There's nothing I can do about it," he says of his fate. "I just feel that when you think about it, I am the luckiest guy in the world."

"Here I am, 68, and there is not a doctor alive who would have thought I would have made it this far. You just do what you're supposed to do every single day."

"Thank God for Liberty Mutual, Boston Edison, nothing but supportive and helpful every step of the way." His medical costs have been covered by his insurance and a settlement

The support of his wife and other family members has also been a huge factor.

He speaks with great feeling about his late father and his father-in-law; both of whom died from cancer during the first year after the accident, and, because of his own surgery, he was unable to attend the wake and funeral of his father-in-law.

"To this day, I am very sad about that," he said, choking up.