



Fires and explosions killed 171 U.S. workers in 2005. And there were moments when Jack McDaniel thought he might prefer that fate to living with third degree burns over 90 percent of his body. But he soon found he had a knack for survival and a reason to go on. "I believe I've got a strong testimony to share," he says. "God left me here to spread the word."

**"THE FIRST TIME I SAW MYSELF, I GAVE UP HOPE."** — Jack McDaniel

Trapped atop a blazing Texas gas well, Jack McDaniel of Florence was frantic to escape the flames that were searing away his flesh.

Three times, he tried to jump 140 feet to his death, and each time he fell before he could make the leap.

His life was spared, but McDaniel wasn't sure he wanted to live it.

"The first time I saw myself, I gave up hope," says the 31-year-old "derrick man," who was burned over 90 percent of his body in a well blowout on March 3, 2006. "I didn't want to

look like a monster. I knew kids would be scared of me — and they are. But then my little girl, Carney, squeezed my hand and said: 'You still look real good.' I thought if she can accept it and my wife can accept it, then I need to buckle down and accept it, too."

## JACK MCDANIEL



Occupational therapist Suzanne Colbert discusses strategies for maintaining hand function with Jack McDaniel and his wife A'Leta.

McDaniel says he likes to face challenges "head on." But he won't sugar-coat how hard life has been since he arrived at the Louisiana State University burn center in Shreveport with third-degree burns covering most of his body.

He has endured more than 50 painful surgeries and skin grafts, and there are more to come. And in between those surgeries, McDaniel must give it his all at Methodist Rehabilitation Center to maintain every ounce of function he has left. "When I get up in the morning, I'm just as stove up as a 90-year-old man," he says. "Once I go to therapy I loosen up and I'm alright."

Dr. Samuel Grissom, medical director at Methodist Rehab, said many of the basic principles of rehabilitation therapy apply to McDaniel. "We want to stretch him and improve his endurance and conditioning," he explains.

But with burn patients, it's a particularly tenuous process. "Their skin gets so tight that it's hard to find a happy medium," says Alison Johnson, a Methodist Rehab physical therapist. "They need stretching really badly, but you can't be too aggressive or their skin will tear."

McDaniel's progress is measured by his degree of movement in each joint, and every day is a fight to maintain improvements from the day before. The process has inspired the title of McDaniel's planned memoir — *Touching Lives 1 Degree at a Time*. And it's a given that more than one chapter of that memoir will focus on his wife A'Leta, a woman he describes as "the strongest person I know."

"My wife stood beside me from day one when I was a burnt-up piece of charcoal. She kissed me and hugged me every day and picked dead skin off my face. And she stood beside me when I screamed and hollered. A lot of times, her voice and touch were all that could calm me down."

A'Leta's strength may well be an inherited trait. Her mom faced similar trials when A'Leta's dad, Lemuel Combs of Florence, was burned in a drilling accident in 1970. "Dad was burned from the waist up, and that was when they just put you in a room to die," she said. Since her dad survived, A'Leta had faith her husband would persevere, too.

"I prayed all the way from Jackson to Shreveport without ceasing, and I told God I knew what he was capable of doing," she said. "I was not going

to accept anything less from Him than making Jack 100 percent again. It was like God wrapped me up and said everything is going to be fine."

While McDaniel continues to improve, returning to his former job is out of the question. His injuries destroyed his sweat glands, and heat tolerance will always be an issue. Contractures caused by tightening skin also remain a threat, as does the possibility that the bones in his major joints could start to fuse.

Still, McDaniel did return to his rig one day so he could say: "You didn't beat me."

"They say I should be blind because I saw the fire, and my lungs should be burned up because I was hollering," he said.

Instead, he's alive and breathing and seeing how some good might come of his tragedy.

"I feel like I've got a strong testimony to share. If one person changes his walk and goes to heaven because I got burnt up or because I say something, then I'll believe it's worth it. I believe God left me here to spread the word."