

When God closes all doors, He opens a window. Often we spend so much energy banging on closed doors that we forget to feel and enjoy the breeze coming through the open window.

Chang Hsiao-Feng in her article in the *Reader's Digest*, 'Lessons My Children Taught Me', and quoted by Alexis Leon in his 'My Story'.

Cold air wafts out of the partly open door, behind which Alexis Leon sits smiling in his wheelchair. As I make my way into his air-conditioned house in Kochi, I forget to close the door. "Please close it," he admonishes gently and wheels into his study, covered by bookshelves on three sides. Positioning himself before his computer, he mutters an apology and shuts it down.

Everything about Alexis is prim, right from his table-top to the way he speaks.

His portly figure fits neatly into the wheelchair which he manoeuvres with élan. Practice, you would say, but Alexis, who turned 34 last month, takes it further. "The wheelchair has become a part of my body," he says, showing how to jump small hurdles with it.

It has been seven years since a crippling accident wiped out colours from his life; seven years since the wheelchair 'became a part of my body'. He has not allowed his mind to go numb from the shock of living with a paralysed body. "I weighed 72 kilos when I met with the accident. Now I might be 95 or even above 100 kilos," he jokes. His big tummy doesn't ripple in the after-effects of his hearty laughter.

"In medical terms, my level of injury is T5," explains Alexis. "Which means I am paralysed from chest downwards. I am actually advised to wear a chest belt to prevent myself

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from falling forward, but I need not do it thanks to my big stomach, which acts as a sort of support."

It is difficult to believe that this is the same cheerful man who wrote a small, brooding piece on his accident, titled 'My Story', three years ago which began with a cryptic statement: "I wish I were dead."

His marriage was only 24 days away when an autorickshaw, ignoring the traffic signal, rammed into his Kinetic Honda at a busy crossing in Chennai on the mid-noon of December 2, 1993. Alexis was on his way to meet the

girl and her family, who had come down to Chennai from her native Kerala to purchase clothes for the wedding. He fell on the road, injuring his forehead and shoulder bone. More serious, though he did not know at that time, was an injury to his spinal cord. He lay in a pool of blood till a policeman dragged him to the floor of an autorickshaw.

"The auto ride further damaged the spinal cord," recalls Alexis. "At first they tried to fit me in horizontally, but when they found that my frame would not fit in, they placed me vertically. All the while I was in my senses, though my shoulder was giving me shooting pain and my forehead bleeding profusely. I asked them to take me to Malar Hospital in Adyar, which was just 500 metres away from where I fell down."

The doctors decided against immediate surgery because, after seeing

the X-ray, they thought his spinal cord had snapped and there was no point in hurrying. When he was operated upon a week later, the doctors found that the damage to the spinal cord was not as severe as they had calculated. "I lost precious days," says Alexis. "Had I been operated upon the very first day my chances of recovery would have improved by 50 to 60 per cent."

A month and a half after the surgery, Alexis was shifted to the Christian Medical College, Vellore, for physiotherapy and occupational therapy. "All the while, everyone kept telling that I will walk one day, and I believed it," he says. But when an occupational therapist told him that his goal would be to attain wheelchair independence he realised that he would never walk again.

Once he was through with the rehab process, TCS welcomed him back. Alexis had joined the company in 1992 and had proved his efficiency working on the biggest software project bagged by an Asian company. "It was a computerised securities clearing system for the Swiss firm Sega/Intersecttle," explains Alexis. "Since it was a huge project, TCS had to set up a separate unit. I was involved in three modules, before and after the accident."

Before joining TCS, Alexis had worked with Ponds in Pondicherry in its leather division. "I didn't like being a leather man," he says. "Besides, working in leather industry is harmful to health." He left Ponds for TCS with very little computer expertise. He had only done a diploma in computer programming and PC application while doing his M.Tech in industrial engineering.

Alexis went through a three-month gruelling schedule and quickly learned the ropes. He even designed a program in Foxpro to help the telephone operator track down TCS employees. "TCS is a huge organisation, and it was difficult to get the



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DOWN TICKET

Alexis Leon survives a crippling accident and becomes an internationally acclaimed author of computer books



whereabouts of employees," says Alexis. "Today you might be in Chennai, tomorrow in California."

A whole lot of plans crashed in the accident. The company was planning to send him to Switzerland, and he had clubbed the official trip with his 'honeymoon'. He was also planning to do a doctorate in industrial engineering in the US.

Though he was warmly welcomed at TCS after the accident, Alexis was soon feeling out of place. Most of his friends had left for greener pastures and the Sega project was almost over. Besides, attending office every day was posing a problem. He submitted his resignation but TCS gave him three months leave to reconsider his decision. He quit after the period and, in partnership with a friend, started Cybernet Software Systems in Chennai in 1996. Alexis was its technical director and he could work from home.

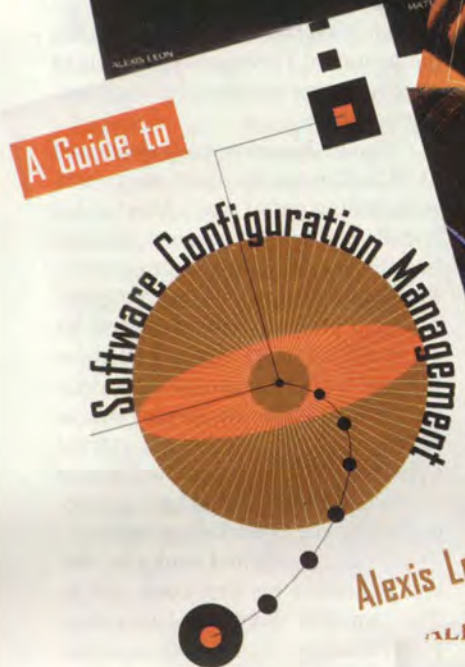
By then Alexis had read a lot and had published his first book, *CICS-The Complete Book for Application Programmers*, in 1995. Two more books came out the same year. In five years, he has published 24 books on subjects ranging from business computing to Oracle and PowerBuilder to Internet to software configuration management.

A book on IBM Mainframe he wrote with former colleague Jibu Thomas sold 50,000 copies. Jibu was more than a colleague: he used to visit Alexis every week in Vellore and the association continues even now though he has moved to the US.

Alexis has collaborated on two books, on PowerBuilder, with US-based software consultant Richard Brooks. After reading some of Brooks's articles on PowerBuilder, Alexis had sought permission to include an ar-

Photos/Babu Vakkacheri

WHEELCHAIR IS NO HANDICAP:
Alexis Leon in his study



ERP Mystified

Alexis Leon
ALEXIS LEON



Alexis's publishers include Tata McGraw-Hill and Artec House Inc. He has set apart the royalties from *Countdown 2000*, a book he edited, for the rehab department of CMC, Vellore.

In 1996 Alexis floated his own company, L&L Consultancy Service Pvt. Ltd, with his engineer-brother Mathews, who has been with him ever since the accident. The firm offers consultancy in all areas related to computer and the Internet, including Web site design and development. He is also the chief reviewer and Web master for Pegasus Book Club (www.inl.net/pbc).

A year later Alexis launched his own publishing firm, Win Leon Publishing Private Ltd in Chennai, to bring out low-cost computer books. "My earlier publisher was not paying me royalties regularly," he says. "So I started the firm with my brother and former Tata McGraw-Hill man P.K. Madhavan as partners." The firm brings out computer books in the Rs 150 range, all written by Alexis and Mathews, and has an exclusive distribution arrangement with Vikas, Delhi.

Alexis is a contented man today. Despite all that has happened in his life, he has not let despondency seep in. True, he has his bouts of depression—getting depressed occasionally is natural, he says—but he overcomes them by listening to classical music and watching television. He does feel sad when he thinks about the things he lost in life, like the Ph.D and the pleasure of riding bikes.

To be near to his parents, Alexis shifted his base to Kochi this January. He doesn't go out these days, preferring to spend time reading—he has an

excellent collection of books on subjects ranging from thrillers to computers to management. And writing. He hopes to write his autobiography one day and has a title ready—'Reinventing the Wheel'.

Lukose Mathew

ticle of Brooks in a book he was writing. Brooks, who has a keen interest in India and Buddhism, was only happy to oblige. Alexis returned the favour when he contributed two articles to a book written by Brooks. In 1997, the two combined to write *PowerBuilder 4—The Application Development Handbook* and *Zen of PowerBuilder*. "I have never met Brooks in person," says Alexis. "But we often chat on the Net."

At present Alexis is writing two books on e-commerce. His publishers include Comdex Computer Publishing, Tata McGraw-Hill and Artec House Inc. He has set apart the royalties from *Countdown 2000*, a book he edited, for the rehab department of the Christian Medical College.

His latest book, *A Guide to Soft-*

ware Configuration Management, was published by Artec simultaneously in the UK and the US. "The book was received well," says Alexis. "There are only 8 or 9 books on the subject and this is the latest one." He has also written several articles in the Chennai-based *DQ Week* magazine.

At one time, Alexis was the headhunter for the US-based Analyst International Corporation and conducted telephonic job interviews. "They stopped taking people from India after the initial recruits left the company for better jobs," he says.