

**Announcer:** Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof leadership podcast. A podcast all about leadership, change, and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before, in your church or in your business. And now your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** Well hey everybody and welcome to episode 276 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. I just wanted to say thank you so much for listening today. I know your summer is busy. You've got a lot on the go, but I'll tell you one of the greatest joys is hearing from you and hearing the difference that these episodes are making, and this one is personal. I talk to a lot of discouraged leaders and you know what? There are days I get discouraged, actually, to be totally transparent. Yesterday, the day before I recorded this intro and extro, I was pretty discouraged, and sometimes I'm just like what is wrong with you man? What is going on?

**Carey Nieuwhof:** That's why I'm really thrilled to bring Chris Norton to the podcast. Some of you may have heard of Chris. He has a powerful story. He was making a routine football play in college that changed his life forever. He was paralyzed from the neck down. Doctors told him he had a 3% chance of ever regaining sensation in his body, but last summer, Chris walked down the aisle with his bride at his wedding. His story has been covered by the Today Show, Good Morning America, NBC Nightly News, Fox and Friends, People Magazine, and today a brand new book with he and his wife Emily come out. It's called The Seven Longest Yards. I sat down with Chris and talked about it.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** I got to know Chris, I think, through a mutual friend about a year ago. We talked about public speaking and getting his message out there and things like that, so it was really a thrill for a guy that I've known and admired for a year, who has the best attitude. Oh my goodness I think about I don't have any problems. I think you're going to really be encouraged by Chris. He's a leader that you've got to get to know.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** Oh by the way, right after Chris and Emily got married, they went out and took in five kids, so they're fostering five kids, which is just incredible, and they're in their mid 20s, so there's that, right? Hey by the way, I'd love to track with you a little more closely, so I'm on all the socials. My favorite these days is Instagram and yeah I would love to connect with you there. My name is just Carey Nieuwhof. That's who I am on Instagram. I'm also on Twitter and Facebook but definitely the most active on Instagram, and in particular Insta story, so I'd love to connect with you there this summer.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** If this episode is helpful, or any episode is helpful, please, please, share it on social, send it around, text the link to friends, etc. I'm going to take a guess here and just guess that a lot of you would love to have more staff than you actually do. True? Yep. That's true for just about all of us. For a lot of churches and organizations it's like you know what? I really wish we had professional graphic designers.

Carey Nieuwhof: I want to talk to you about a pastor's kid named Steph. She went to college for graphic design, headed off to Australia, went to Hillsong College, returned to the US and has a passion to help churches with her creative gift. Steph started working at Pro Media Fire as a professional graphic designer and really came alive helping churches reach more people with her graphic design skills.

Carey Nieuwhof: So whether it's a sermon series event promo, something for kids in youth, Steph loves helping churches around the world as far away as New Zealand at Pro Media Fire. The Pro Media Fire graphic designers really have a heart for the church, and they'd love to help you get started with professional graphic design at a fraction of the cost of hiring your own team personally.

Carey Nieuwhof: They're creatives on a mission and they know content and media well, and as you can tell, they're well-educated. Listeners of this podcast receive 10% off plans for life by going to [promediafire.com/carey](http://promediafire.com/carey). That's [promediafire.com/carey](http://promediafire.com/carey). Also, brand new partner on this podcast ... welcome Church Community Builder. Now you need like a database right? Everybody does. I remember that was one of our first decisions when we started Connexus Church. Church Community Builder has been around for 20 years, because 20 years ago their founder realized only a few people in his church were really becoming regular attenders once they were baptized.

Carey Nieuwhof: The idea is not just to have a database but to build a community. Church Community Builder exists to solve that problem by helping you welcome people, get them plugged into community, and prevent them from slipping through the cracks or out the back door. Their software handles everything from children's check-in, volunteer management, giving events, facility scheduling forms to even worship planning. It's built to be the only tool you need for ministry.

Carey Nieuwhof: They even have a mobile app of course now that give you and your leaders information about people, notes, and other tools on the go. If you care about people engagement and discipleship, Church Community Builder is a must-have. They're celebrating 20 years and guess what? They're offering 20% off to podcast listeners. So you can head on over to [churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey](http://churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey) to get started. Let them know I sent you.

Carey Nieuwhof: So go to [churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey](http://churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey). You will get 20% off because you listened to this show. Pretty cool. If you're looking for a new solution for your church, make sure you check that out at [churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey](http://churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey). And without much further adieu, so thrilled to bring you my conversation with Chris Norton. Chris welcome to the podcast. It's just a thrill to have you on. I feel like we've been friends for a year or so, and now it's great to have you on the show.

Chris Norton: Yeah I know. It's great to be on the show and talk with you, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof: How did we connect? Let's go back to that. You reached out to me, right?

- Chris Norton: I did. I just got some of your content and I was moved by it. I just somehow through the grapevine got connected with you and here we are.
- Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, yeah, here we are, here we are. Yeah it's funny because we've been talking about public speaking. We've been talking about your story and your life. I mean an awful lot of coverage too. Today your brand new book releases on the day that we're releasing this podcast. You and Emily will be on Good Morning America, if all goes according to plan. Is that right?
- Chris Norton: That's correct, so fingers crossed nothing crazy happens in the world.
- Carey Nieuwhof: And you've been featured in USA Today and People. You've been on the Today Show. You've been on Good Morning America before. You've been all over the place.
- Chris Norton: Yeah we've been blessed to just be all over international and about every major network and major show. If we haven't been on it, we've at least been featured on it.
- Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, which is incredible and it all goes back to a pivotal moment in your life, nine years ago now, in 2010. I'd like for you, for people who are new to you or new to your story, to take us back to that moment when you were playing ... was it high school football?
- Chris Norton: It was college football.
- Carey Nieuwhof: College. It was college football.
- Chris Norton: My freshman year, 18-year-old kid, sixth game of the season. Just everything was going according to plan. I was working my way up the starting ranks and playing more than any other freshman on the team. Things were perfect, and it was a perfect day too. It was just beautiful weather. The leaves on the trees were changing colors. The low 60s, upper 50s. My family's in the stands that came, made the drive to watch me play. The third quarter we scored a touchdown, which means it's our turn to kick the ball off to the other team.
- Chris Norton: I run out to the field. The play is mortar kick right, which simply is a short high-arching kick to the right side of the field. I don't know why we don't just call it kick right, because the kicker was so bad. Every kick was short and high-arching. But anyway, I actually play on the right side of the field, and so I was going to get in on the action. This was my chance-
- Carey Nieuwhof: What was your position? What were you playing?
- Chris Norton: I was the outside gunner, so my job was just to run the sideline and make sure no one got outside of me ... outside of my boundary. The kick was going right to

my boundary so I was pumped. The ball is kicked and I'm sprinting downfield. I see this opening forming and I know that ball carrier is going to run through that hall. Just my instincts telling me everything looks like he's going to be coming right through there.

Chris Norton: I make a diving tackle for his legs. He's a lot bigger than me. Most people were a lot bigger than me. I was undersized for my position, so I learned you just get lower than them. You take them out at the knees, at the ankles. You can stop them pretty quick when they don't have their feet underneath them.

Carey Nieuwhof: How tall are you?

Chris Norton: Now I'm like 6'1" but at the time I was still growing. I was like 5'11".

Carey Nieuwhof: Okay and not a bulky guy either. You're pretty thin.

Chris Norton: Yeah not a bulky guy but just fearless. I wasn't afraid of contact. That's where I was able to work my way up the ranks pretty quickly because of my tenacity and relentlessness and not having fear in the field, which is a huge part of football. Yeah I'd see this opening and I dive at his legs, but I mistimed my jump just by a split second. So instead of getting my head in front of the ball carrier and hitting him with my shoulder, my head hits him right on his legs, and he's a big boy. In an instant I lose all my feeling and movement from my neck down. I'm face down motionless. I hear the collision of the players above me. The pile clears, but I can't get up. I'm conscious. I'm trying to push off the ground. Nothing's working. I'm confused.

Chris Norton: I can tell then the game was stopped for me and I'm thinking this is embarrassing. I don't want the game to stop for me. So I'm trying so hard to move something and nothing was working. Little did I know but I suffered a severe spinal cord injury and it would take me years and years before I'd ever be able to stand again, and I'd never stand the same way.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah that was instantaneous and a devastating loss at the time. You tell the story so well in your book, which releases today. Give us the title of the book too.

Chris Norton: The Seven Longest Yards.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah and we'll get to what that means, because it's a powerful story. But you had zero sensation. Was it from the neck down, Chris?

Chris Norton: Yeah, it was neck down. It was terrifying because I felt like-

Carey Nieuwhof: To a quadriplegic, basically the diagnosis was quadriplegic. Will never walk again, feel anything again from the neck down?

Chris Norton: Yeah so I was given a 3% chance to ever regain any feeling or movement back below the neck. Not a 3% chance to walk, which it's easy to just assume that it was the walking aspect, but it was so much more than just to walk. It was to scratch an itch on your face, to be able to feed yourself, all those little things that are easy to overlook when you have nothing below the neck.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow okay and tell us more about that day and the hours that followed, because it was pretty devastating loss. I mean the reality is we can hardly imagine it right? You're perfectly healthy one moment diving in a football game, and the next you can't move anything.

Chris Norton: Yeah and the play ... it felt like a normal play. It didn't feel like anything where you'd be watching and the crowd goes ooh, ouch, that's got to hurt or something bad happened. There was none of that. It was really bizarre just how devastating of an injury it was for not really that shocking play or visual play.

Carey Nieuwhof: And what was it then? Was it just the way that your head and neck collided? It was just one of those freak things where the ankle was just perfect/imperfect?

Chris Norton: Exactly. I think that it just must be. Yeah, so I'm laying there. The trainers come over and they roll me onto my back. They begin asking my questions like Chris can you make a fist with your hand. I try making a fist and nothing happens. Chris can you feel us touching your leg? I can't feel a thing. They keep asking these questions over and over again, and I'm thinking just give it more time. I'll eventually get my feeling and movement back. There's no way something bad can happen to me. Bad things happen to other people that you read about in the newspaper or watch on television, or maybe it's a guest on your podcast, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof: But we have that, especially at 18 I imagine, there's that invincibility right? That just doesn't happen to me.

Chris Norton: 100%. There was invincibility. This wasn't part of my plan. My plan was to be this all American athlete and to meet the girl of my dreams and get a business degrees, and someday make enough money to own a lake house, or better yet, the girl of my dreams family already owned a lake house.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Chris Norton: But being paralyzed from the neck down and not being able to move wasn't on my radar. So yeah I had that invincibility inside of me that this can't be happening. It's going to get better here quickly. It's just a big scare. But eventually when the trainers and the paramedics got involved, the paramedics called for a helicopter. When they called for a helicopter, that's when I knew oh man.

Carey Nieuwhof: This is serious.

- Chris Norton: This is serious. I closed my eyes. I just began to pray, just God, just please give me the strength to just walk off this field and to get back to my life. Just let this be a big scare or misunderstanding. I just want to get back to that life, to that plan. Sometimes God has a better plan for you than the plan you had for yourself.
- Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah that's interesting the way you say that. I mean to some extent I think we've all had moments, not as devastating as yours where we're like oh this can't be happening, this suspended reality, and yet you said something really interesting. God has better plans for your life than you do. Do you think this is a better plan?
- Chris Norton: It is a better plan. Now we're jumping very far ahead into my story.
- Carey Nieuwhof: No we are, I'm just curious. You don't usually hear that. We will get to the end of the story. You're doing this interview in a wheelchair.
- Chris Norton: Yeah disclaimer, that was not running through my head though at the time of the play. It's just a reflection of how God can take His mess and make it His message and your pain into a purpose. That's really where I have discovered for myself. It took years and years and lots of hard work obviously to be sitting in a wheelchair and feel that my life is better than what it was before I was hurt. But yeah, it's not an overnight thing, and I don't want anyone to think that that should be the case for them. Just flip of a switch where they have this new view on life, that this is going to be better than what they had before.
- Chris Norton: I think when you just keep going, even if you don't know where you're going, God can put this beautiful plan together.
- Carey Nieuwhof: So you get airlifted to the hospital. What happens next?
- Chris Norton: I go through a series of checks and scans. They had to break my neck back together through traction. My neck was so badly broken and dislocated, a grade IV dislocation, C3-C4 fracture. I had to be awake for that. That was brutal. Then through an MRI machine. Then right before surgery, I will never forget this. The surgeon asked, "Chris, do you have any questions?" I asked him, "Will I ever be able to walk again?" This was the burning question in my mind. I'm thinking you know what? I won't even ask about playing sports because at this point sports is everything to me. I'm an athlete. I'm a competitor. The idea of not playing sports was already devastating.
- Chris Norton: So I thought you know what? Let's set the bar low and just ask about walking. I also assumed that as a doctor they have the answers. They'll know what's going on. They have a plan or a sheet that can tell you exactly what's going to happen to my life. The surgeon just looks at me, just looks defeated. He just says, "Chris, I don't know." At that point I just let out all the tears I was holding back.

Chris Norton: The next thing I know I'm asleep for surgery. I wake up the next day on October 17th, 2010, thinking I just had the worst nightmare of my life. The surgeon comes in. My nightmare becomes my reality. He tells me, "Chris, you have a 3% chance to move anything below your neck." That's the beginning of this new life and this new identity that I had to go searching for and discover for myself.

Carey Nieuwhof: What's going through your mind as you hear that news?

Chris Norton: It was like going into the twilight zone. Just my ears were ringing. My vision went blurry. Just thinking no way, not me. No way. This cannot be my life. I went into a panic mode, a desperation that I have to scratch and crawl, do whatever I have to do to get out of this place. I want my life back. I did the only thing I could do after he told me that news, which was to nod my head yes and no. I just nodded my head yes and no for hours. I looked like a giant bobble head just bouncing my head around.

Chris Norton: I was focused on whatever I could do today to get a little bit better, because I did not want to be in the place that I was at. I don't know where that resilience or that confidence comes from, but it was just something that I couldn't settle with. I just went to work and trying to distract myself really. I just couldn't let my thoughts go to the place of my future, because after I started thinking about the future, it would send me spiraling down.

Chris Norton: That's where at nighttime when I went to bed, I couldn't help but think about the what-ifs and will I always be like this? Will I ever meet a girl that would want to be with me? Will I ever go back to school? Will I ever be happy? That was really the hardest time was just going to bed.

Carey Nieuwhof: How did you get through that in those first few days, weeks, months?

Chris Norton: A number of things. One was my dad would read bible verses. He would read inspirational posts and stories. He was my rock when I was just shaken up, and I'm really thankful for the people who wrote to me on the CaringBridge site. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that site at all.

Carey Nieuwhof: I am.

Chris Norton: But that's a really powerful way, and I would encourage people if you know anyone who is putting their story, their injury on CaringBridge, write to them, because it was those messages from complete strangers where I started to see my pain being used for a purpose. I wasn't out to be an inspiration by any means. I was just trying to get my life back, but that's when I first started to see people inspired and moved by the challenges I was going through and the motivation that I had, and it carried over to that.

Chris Norton: So that helped me knowing that other people were being encouraged by what I was going through by not giving up, and it gave me some more fuel to the fire to

keep going. Then also on the fourth night, I'll never forget this. It's about 4:00 AM, I can't sleep, and this physician comes in to check my vitals, which is typical. Someone checks my vitals every two hours, but then she checks my vitals and she does something differently. She gets down on one knee and she says, "Chris, look me in the eyes." She was kind of mean about it.

Chris Norton: So I lock eyes with her. She's a short, slender woman, short reddish hair. She has these glasses and her voice sounded like she came straight out of a Western movie. She just says, "My name's Georgia. I'm from Wyoming. Do you know anyone from Wyoming?" I say no. I'm thinking where is this going? Then she says, "People from Wyoming don't tell lies, and I want you to know you will beat this. You will beat this." I instantly just break down crying. I needed to hear those words so badly. I was in such a vulnerable place questioning whether all my time and effort would ever pay off.

Chris Norton: In that moment she just completely restored my faith and hope and it gave me the courage just to keep going.

Carey Nieuwhof: And she was a doctor.

Chris Norton: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

Chris Norton: I believed her. It was such an impactful moment and something I always helped other people consider, is just how impactful our words really can be.

Carey Nieuwhof: When did you decide that you were going to defy the odds?

Chris Norton: I mean right away I was determined just because there's such an urgency to get out of this position. It was so uncomfortable. It was so painful. It just wasn't the life I wanted to live and right away I just was desperate for something more. I just had to go to work. It was the only way I could really cope with what was happening was just knowing that I'm doing whatever I can to better myself. Something I've always known growing up was that your future will take care of itself when you take care of today.

Chris Norton: I was just so focused on taking care of today. Don't get me wrong. It was hard not to reflect back on what used to be and what could have been, and just trying to wrestle with those emotions and try to stay present and just focused on what I can do.

Carey Nieuwhof: You've overcome some of the obstacles that you faced and you passed a few milestones. Can you share some of those key milestones with us that you passed?

Chris Norton: Yeah one big one was just being able to move my toe, my left big toe on Thanksgiving morning after this doctor told me that I would never move anything in my legs again just a week earlier, and then I'm able to wiggle this left big toe. It was the greatest gift that I've ever received, just being able to wiggle a toe. I was so excited. Just a toe wiggle.

Carey Nieuwhof: How does that happen? I remember the story in the book, but walk us through it. How did that happen?

Chris Norton: Well about the fifth week mark I begin to feel this new sensation in my left big toe, like it was coming out of a sleep, like you get a Novocaine shot and it starts to come out. Well I'm not able to move it, but I feel like it's going to happen. I tell the doctor this and he tells me, "Well Chris you're actually experiencing a phantom feeling, where you want to believe that you can feel something differently in your left big toe. You actually tricked yourself into thinking it's real, but you made it up."

Carey Nieuwhof: So he said it's psycho whatever. It's like people who apparently lose a limb. They can still feel their elbow or whatever.

Chris Norton: Yeah it's a real thing, like this phantom feeling or this phantom pain. I don't know quite the science behind it but he just put this diagnosis or whatever you may want to call it onto me and what I was experiencing and really didn't give me a chance to explain or really listen to me. He just really brushed it off very quickly and then was just matter of fact of, "Chris you'll never move anything in your legs ever again." He turns and walks out like it was no big deal.

Chris Norton: It was the very thing I had been working so hard for, and now it feels impossible. I just was devastated. I just started crying. My dad was with me. He started crying. I've never seen my dad cry before until this moment. A really pivotal moment then for me was my dad just turning to me with tears coming down his face and saying, "Chris, don't let anyone tell you what you can or cannot do." I looked back at him with tears in my eyes and say, "I never will."

Chris Norton: It was that moment and hearing Georgia's words of you will beat this were I'm like I'm going to prove this doctor wrong. So I just set out to work even harder, up my therapy, and if I wasn't in therapy, I had my therapist write up workouts I can do on my own outside of my scheduled therapy time.

Carey Nieuwhof: What does that mean? You're not just sitting there going move toe. What are you doing to try to bring about motion?

Chris Norton: So things like they had this locomotive walking machine. Pretty much like robotic legs that go over your legs and around your chest that straps you in, and it literally walks your legs from the upright position on a treadmill, so doing that for hours. Trying to get electric stimulation on my quads and my hamstrings, and my calves. Just getting stimulation to those muscles, getting me upright,

just trying to get my body to wake up and to heal were some of the things that I was doing on top of just working my upper body.

Chris Norton: I mean I had to work every single part of my body. When you lose everything from the neck down, it's not like when you go to the gym you're like I'm going to work on my upper body or work on my lower body. Every day was like everything, your toes, your fingers, it's a lot.

Carey Nieuwhof: So you're in an insane amount of physio.

Chris Norton: Yes. Insane amount and just trying to chip away because I knew ... I just didn't want to get a year out or a couple of years out and think what if? What if I just would have worked a little bit harder? What if I wouldn't have taken off that day or that therapy session? Those what ifs just would haunt me, thinking about the past, so I just had to commit so I didn't have any regrets in the future.

Carey Nieuwhof: Did anyone think you were being excessive in doing all that therapy?

Chris Norton: You know, no one did.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh interesting.

Chris Norton: Everyone was pretty impressed, inspired. They were happy to see someone be this determined because a lot of times they see the other direction of someone just wanting to give up and not wanting to try, and just settling for what was given to them. For me it was obviously the opposite. Now there is a time they did say you can fatigue your nerves before you fatigue your muscles.

Chris Norton: Although your muscles might not feel fatigued, your nervous system is fatigued. So there was a difference. I had to learn that difference and when it did give out, to just stop and to move onto something else. That was a few things that I had to recognize was to not overdo it. You don't want to wear out the nerves in that signal, that connection that was going from your brain to your muscle.

Carey Nieuwhof: How did that happen, that day that you could actually move and feel your toe for the first time, and it wasn't a phantom pain?

Chris Norton: It felt like Christmas morning. It was an amazing moment. I was with my sisters. I was telling them we've got to go tell mom ... my mom and my dad. They were at another room. On top of that I was telling every nurse and therapist you go find that doctor, who I like to call Dr. Phantom, and you bring him in here and tell him to phantom this as I wiggle my toe in his face.

Chris Norton: Fortunately for him he was gone that day. But [inaudible 00:28:46] fired up. I might have said something I regretted, but it worked out. I was also just then able to prank my family too, because my dad, he's like this big motivator. He

likes to do a little pep talk. So he would pep talk my feet. So I told my dad when he came in, before he knew I could wiggle my toe, I'm like, "Dad, can you give that pep talk to my toe? I think it could really use it this morning." He's like, "Oh yeah of course."

Chris Norton: So he gets down by my feet. He's screaming at it like let's go toe, move and just yelling. Then I wiggle my toe and his head popped up like he just saw a ghost. My mom looks over to me like did you just do that? I did it again with a big grin on my face. My mom just breaks down crying on the spot. She was happy, then also angry at me. She's like, "You could do that this whole time and you didn't just tell us?" So I thought that was pretty funny. It was a really special day to celebrate it with family and to wiggle a toe was such a blessing.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow and then it's progressed since there. Walk us through some of the other milestones, Chris.

Chris Norton: Yeah, big milestone for me was I was going to walk across the stage at my college graduation. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but that was going to be the goal, putting in four to six hours a day on top of a full school load. So in 2015 in May I was able to walk across the stage of my college graduation, which went viral. That was with my then fiance Emily. I proposed to her the day before that graduation walk, which I was way more nervous for that proposal than the actual walk in front of the stage.

Chris Norton: It would have been really awkward if she would have said no, so I'm glad it worked out. But that was a beautiful moment for us. The next big one was to walk seven yards side by side for our wedding, which that happened three years, which seven yards with seven years since my injury, and then also three yards further than my graduation walk, and we were going to do it side by side. Same way we would be going through the rest of our lives.

Carey Nieuwhof: You and Emily. I saw the video. It's powerful.

Chris Norton: Yeah. No it was a beautiful moment. I could have gone probably 14 yards. I just had a lot in the tank.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah you really did. You didn't look like you were done, even though you were at the end of the of the seven yard runway.

Chris Norton: Yeah I was. I was really nervous that I wasn't going to make it. I remember the first time we practiced that walk side by side, because when she's at my side, I lose a lot of support that I'm used to. If you look back on the graduation walk, she's right in front of me supporting me, and the wedding walk she's right at my hip. So I had lost a ton of support and when we first practiced that walk, I couldn't even take one step. This is like eight months before the wedding and I'm thinking oh no. This is not good. I can't even take a step. I have to go seven yards. On top of that we have a film crew that was coming to film the wedding

and do a documentary on my story. They already named the movie Seven Yards, so I had to walk those seven.

Carey Nieuwhof: You've got no choice. That's a big step from moving your toe to walking down the aisle seven yards and walking across the stage at your graduation. Was it just progressive between those two points, like the toe turned into what ... a foot ... turned into a leg? How did that go?

Chris Norton: Yeah just a slow progression from a toe wiggle to firing my quadriceps and then hamstring. Just slowly got more movement, more feeling. It was just baby steps from there and just a lot of work, and a lot of time in the gym.

Carey Nieuwhof: Is there an explanation for that, neurologically?

Chris Norton: It's a combination of just your swelling and the healing of your spinal cord after that trauma and surgery. It's also just a lot of repetition, a lot of work, a lot of time to put into it. Plus I had a great therapy coverage. The NCAA Catastrophic Insurance Policy, which covered all my medical and rehab expenses just because I was a student athlete at an NCAA affiliated school. So they've been able to cover and offset all the costs that people would have to incur to keep training, which just broke my heart knowing there's thousands of people in a chair who want a recovery just like mine, if not more, but can't afford to do so just because of their insurance or whatever coverage they may have.

Chris Norton: So actually knowing that, we actually started a nonprofit called the Chris Norton Foundation. We provide grants to rehab facilities to get the best technology as possible so that other people can gain access to this technology to help them with their recovery, and on top of that, by the time of this recording, we would have already done a wheelchair camp for kids and family. So kids and families come for free to do a week-long camp to zip line, horseback ride, archery, sports, and other fun activities. So that's some of the things that we do with the foundation. That's just the result of just seeing people that just want more with their life, but just can't afford to do so.

Chris Norton: Here I am with all these privileges because of this NCAA insurance policy, so we just wanted to give back.

Carey Nieuwhof: How do you fund that? That's amazing.

Chris Norton: Through a lot of grassroots fundraising and donations. We've put on an annual event every year in my hometown in Des Moines, Iowa. We're just constantly just doing things like that, and through my speaking too. As I go out and do my motivational speeches, people ... they learn about my foundation. They want to get involved. So we're really just grateful that as I'm able to grow with speaking or other things, that the foundation is growing too.

Carey Nieuwhof: You mentioned Emily and falling in love and the whole deal. That must have been a lot of fear. It's like wow am I ever going to get married? How is this going to work? Tell us about how you met and how that led up to your wedding a year ago.

Chris Norton: Yeah meeting Emily was such a blessing. Unbelievable because I was so scared about ever meeting a girl, ever falling in love. I felt like I had maybe too high of standards for myself. I always dreamed about having a girl in my life and to be a father, a husband. I definitely questioned it, whether that would actually be a reality. Well three years later I'm online. We come across each other and just start casual messaging. Then Emily starts asking me all these personal deep questions like, "Chris, what's it like after waking up from surgery?" Kind of the same questions that you've asked, Carey, but just from a complete stranger that I've never met. It just caught me off guard. Questions that people are typically scared to ask when you first meet someone. She just went all in on those questions and just allowed me to feel open and comfortable in my own skin.

Chris Norton: We were just able to meet this connection. She had so much curiosity. We then set up a public meeting spot for us to meet up, and I really thought I was in trouble because when she suggested that she could just come pick me up in her little two door yellow car with my wheelchair, I'm like oh no. She has no idea of my situation, how much work it takes. You can't just throw my chair in the back of her car and easily get me in the front seat. It just doesn't work like that.

Chris Norton: So I really thought that she was naïve to the idea of what I was going through, or maybe I recovered completely and was walking. But eventually we were able to meet up and she looked me in the eyes, not at my hands, not at my legs, and just it went from there. For me it was love at first sight.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's amazing. You know you said something she looked you in the eyes. How, as somebody who is living a very different life for the last almost decade now than you did for your first almost two decades, how do when someone meets you, what is the best way to engage someone who is in a situation like you are, in a wheelchair?

Chris Norton: Just talk to them like you would any other person. Yeah look them in the eyes, reach your hand out, shake their hand. I can't tell you how many times, especially in the first five years of my injury, I couldn't hardly move my right arm to lift my arm up to shake hands, and how many times I tried to shake someone's hands when they reached their arm out, but they were uncomfortable on whether or not to grab my hand to shake it, so they put their hand out, I put my hand out, and then they just pull their hand back slowly. It's like this really awkward situation, but it was just like just grab my hand, just shake it. You're not going to hurt me.

Chris Norton: It's little moments like that, that I have realized it would make me feel uncomfortable. Even sometimes people too, they'll come down on one knee

right next to my chair and be at eye level. I appreciate that too. Not that you have to do that, don't get me wrong, but little things like that just makes you feel welcome and accepted. I don't mind people talking to me, asking me questions about my injury. It gives me an opportunity to hopefully maybe change their perspective.

Carey Nieuwhof: What were some of the challenges you and Emily had in your period of dating and being engaged and leading up to the wedding, because no relationship is perfect right?

Chris Norton: Definitely not. You can't get it wrong that we didn't have this fairytale love story, which sometimes I think people believe that. For us it just wasn't the case. We had a lot of trials, a lot of struggles, and things really escalated after the graduation walk, which I thought was the beginning of just this fairytale life and love story. But then depression and anxiety hit Emily really hard. I didn't see it coming. Title of your book, right?

Carey Nieuwhof: That's true.

Chris Norton: It just was something that caught us both off guard because she struggled with the idea of how can I be depressed when nothing bad happened to me? She thought depression had to be a source of something that came from a devastating accident or a car ... something horrible happening.

Carey Nieuwhof: Some kind of trauma that happened in her life.

Chris Norton: Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof: Fair enough. Was there a particular trigger? You graduated. You did the walk across the stage and all of a sudden she's struggling with depression and anxiety.

Chris Norton: There's a couple of factors that later ... I mean now make sense, but at the time I didn't realize it ... so she has a huge heart for helping kids ... kids who are struggling in the foster care system who have gone through trauma and abuse. She is so empathetic that she would take on all of their pain, all of their struggles, onto herself and carry that weight for them.

Chris Norton: It started to just wear her down, all this abuse and all these things that these kids were carrying, that she was already carrying for them. On top of that just the distraction of the graduation walk was no longer there. It was now a reality of what do I do now? Where do we go from here? She poured her heart and soul into my graduation walk, which was really kind of a coping mechanism because she started to realize that she couldn't save every child, couldn't help every single person.

Chris Norton: It just made her feel weak and vulnerable and scared, so she distracted herself with the graduation. With no longer the graduation walk and just everything before herself, it just was too much and began to spiral down and our relationship spiraled down. We were fighting constantly, and I didn't understand it at all, depression. I wish I would have known more about it beforehand to better of helped her. Just like would have listened to her versus trying to fix her and tell her what to do, which does not work.

Carey Nieuwhof: Apparently not. I keep trying but it's not very effective, Chris.

Chris Norton: It's not. I'm thinking I'm a motivational speaker. I'll just motivate her.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh dude, I'll tell you ... when you pull the do you know what I do for a living card at home, that never ... you know I wrote on that recently. Let me quote myself to you. It's a disaster, yeah.

Chris Norton: Yeah exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof: I never thought you would say it that way but it's like you know I have some tips for you. Nope. Does not go well.

Chris Norton: I'm like this is what I did when I went through my injury. You've got to do this. She would get so mad about that. So things like that did not work. I just didn't know how to help her. It was so tough because it began to look like our walk or our wedding wasn't going to happen just by how much conflict and stress there was on our relationship. I just didn't know if we'd ever get back to that place and our faith started to take a back burner as well.

Chris Norton: As we were going through these hard times, the very thing that we should have gone towards is the very thing that we pushed to the side. I think I limited God in what He can do and how He could help me. So I thought he's not going to be able to fix a relationship. I have to fix it. But it just took too long for me to figure things out and for Emily to figure things out, but thankfully we were able to mend things and she turned things around.

Carey Nieuwhof: How did you pull it together in time to decide hey we're going to get married, we're going to do this.

Chris Norton: Yeah it was probably about two years after the graduation walk where things were really a struggle, but then Emily went to a church service and it talked about praying, and just the power of prayer. She had been too scared to pray because it was too vulnerable for her. It just meant that she was weak, that she needed help. She's the kind of person who is very independent, doesn't like to be vulnerable, doesn't want to get help, so the idea of turning to God meant that she needed a lot of help, and if she can't help herself through this, then how can she be saved or get through life if something bad truly happened to her. That was kind of her thinking at the time.

Chris Norton: But just this prayer service started to open her up to prayer, and then we started going to church on a regular basis, and it just felt like the pastor in the service was speaking directly to our lives and it gave her the courage to go seek help from a medical professional. It gave her that strength to see that medical professional because so many times she's made that appointment and canceled it and didn't show up because she was too scared. But it was with that faith that gave her that push and she got the help, she got the medication she needed, and it turned things around drastically. It was a combination of the faith, but then also just seeing a medical professional.

Chris Norton: I mean if you break your bone, you've got to go see a doctor. You can't just pray about it. It was the combination of the two that really broke things through for her and then just our relationship. We started to put God in the center of it.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's good to know. Then you guys got married in 2018 is it?

Chris Norton: Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof: You did the walk down the aisle, which was exceptional to see. Tell me, when you look back over the last nine years, at the time that we're recording this, what are some of the most powerful lessons you've learned? One of them you say in your book, and one of the things that I love about your book is Emily tells her part of the story, you tell yours. They alternate, I think, in most of the chapters. But you say, "Our lives aren't shaped by circumstances. They're shaped by us."

Carey Nieuwhof: Some people would find that really hard to take. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Chris Norton: Yeah you know, there's a lot of circumstances and places that we get ourselves in that we didn't choose. I didn't choose to be paralyzed. I didn't want this to happen but it did happen. There's a lot of things that you didn't see coming and then things are affected, but then it's up to you to be responsible for how you move forward. It's taking that responsibility of your circumstances and where you're at to get to the next place. You should just never settle for the life that was handed to you, and don't finish where you started is a big thing. To just always improve and just get to the next step, the next stage.

Carey Nieuwhof: Why do you think you pursued that route, Chris? Why didn't you just sink into depression, despair, resignation? I'm just going to give up and be miserable and bitter and angry about this. Because you see that a lot. You see that a lot in life, and that's not your story.

Chris Norton: You're right. I think it's two parts. It was my faith. It was seeing this light at the end of the tunnel of what's possible with God. So having that faith element gave me just a glimmer of hope of maybe there's something better out there. Maybe my life won't be ruined with God. I'm thankful to have that faith foundation. The

other thing too ... I think just my sports background, being an athlete, because I've had practices and workouts where I didn't think I could finish, but I finished. I had games where it looks like there's no chance of a comeback, but we came back and I failed over and over again as a student and as an athlete, but when you are a student athlete, you know you have to show up the next day and just to keep going.

Chris Norton: So I think it was that experience and that confidence built over years and years of just failing and putting myself in those vulnerable places that gave me enough confidence to move forward when this devastating accident happened to me.

Carey Nieuwhof: You've started a company. You're doing a lot of public speaking now. You've got a lot of media coverage too. What are some of the leadership lessons you've learned over this last decade as you've done more and more public life and continued with your recovery? I take it it's a daily progressive thing.

Chris Norton: Yeah something I want people to consider is that you just ... most of our challenges you can't see. Everyone sees my challenges. Everyone sees what I'm going through and as a result, I have the privilege to see the best in people. People are so nice and encouraging to me. I just don't consider my challenges to be greater than anyone else's. Again, you can see mine. They're just visible. I think if we can just realize that everyone is going through something, everyone has their own battles and challenges in their life. You can't see anxiety or depression.

Chris Norton: You can't see the loss of a loved one. Sometimes you can't see cancer or the battles that someone else is facing. Just always consider to be your best self and to be encouraging. Tell someone that you will beat this, not just you can beat this, what Georgia did for me. We all can be a Georgia to someone else.

Chris Norton: I think considering that, and that we're all having those battles, and just being intentional about focusing on progress, on the good, the blessings in your life, that's something I have to do every single day. Stay grounded with what I can do and the progress that I am making. That just gives me the energy and encouragement to move forward, and people can just start focusing on that progress, the good, the blessings, that will give you that motivation to keep going.

Carey Nieuwhof: How do you do that? How do you stay focused? How do you make sure? Because I think that you're right. That is a daily battle for everybody ... those who are mobile, those who are not. I have an exceptionally good life and there are days ... I have been gratitude journaling this year because there are days where I can focus on what's not right, not on what's right. How do you do that? How do you stay focused on the opportunity, not the obstacle?

Chris Norton: First you've got to give yourself a break, right? Everyone. You're human. You're going to have days when things aren't going right, where you are frustrated,

where you're mad, you are focusing on what is not going well. So first just recognize it for what it is. You're human and it's okay to have those feelings and to just let it out and to feel that.

Chris Norton: I think sometimes where it can be problematic is just burying it in, and it's okay to just feel that, but just not letting that then last for too long. Let that be just a minute of venting, of getting it off your chest ... maybe two minutes. I think where it can really be problematic is that you will carry that with you for a day, a week, a month, a year, and just bury that inside. You've just got to let that out. Let that out and then just get to work.

Chris Norton: When I'm busy, when I'm focusing on the task at hand, and what I can do, it's just breaking it down today. How can I get a little bit closer to resolving my problem or to get towards my goal. When I feel that I'm making that progress and I'm working towards something, it just feels good. No matter how far up the mountain you have to go, but when you're able to just take that step and focus on that step that you made closer to the top, it feels good.

Carey Nieuwhof: You and I have had a couple of conversations about public speaking and it's something you never thought you'd do with your life, and here you are now flying all over the world to speak to audiences. I noticed one of the things you taught me, because you hired a public speaking coach ... can you tell us about telling stories in the present tense, not the past tense, and if you listen back to the beginning of this interview, that's exactly what Chris did.

Chris Norton: Yeah so something that was really powerful for me was to talk in the ... tell stories in the present sense, especially very big moments in your life. Telling like my injury story in first person, present tense, allows me to relive that moment. I can see that opening when I tell that story. I can see that ball carrier running through because I'm telling it as if it's happening. So it just allows me to go to that place and to not let that moment be dry or allow me to just brush over that like it's not a big deal, because it is a big deal. It was a big moment in my life.

Chris Norton: For all speakers, pastors out there, I think that could be a huge shift for you just to be in that moment, to really feel it, and take you back to that place, especially if it's a story that you have told a lot.

Carey Nieuwhof: Can you role play one or two of those sentences in the past tense, and then how you would retell it in the present tense? I know we talked about that quite a bit and I'm like gosh I know that's right, but nobody ever said it out loud in that way. Just tell it as most people would normally tell it, and then as you tell it. Just a couple of sentences, a paragraph.

Chris Norton: Yeah so I think the Georgia story, right? This woman came in and then she got down in one knee next to my bed. She told me to look her in the eyes. Then I looked back at her eyes and she said whatever she said, you know, "My name is Georgia." I think how I would tell it ... obviously how I did tell it, was this woman

comes in. She sits right next to my bed, down on one knee, and she tells me, "Chris, look me in the eyes." I don't know just that little shift.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah it's present tense versus past tense.

Chris Norton: Present tense versus past tense. I'm not sure that was enough of a sample for you, but that's just making that shift from she told to she tells me.

Carey Nieuwhof: Happening in real time. I've been experimenting with that in my writing and also in my speaking. It really does make a difference. It makes it more visceral, more immediate, more real, and more sensory for some reason. I don't know why, but that's good. What else are you learning about public speaking, Chris?

Chris Norton: I've learned that it's really important to get the audio right, to get the visuals right, to get the stage right. To get all those little pieces right ahead of time, before you even take stage, how is the audience seated? How is the room lit up? What were they doing before they came into that room? What are they doing after I get done speaking? Just little things to take into account because that just effects the energy level of the audience and how you're going to be received.

Chris Norton: I think I'm always trying to take into account those little factors that I overlooked in the beginning. I showed up ... when I was younger ... 30 minutes before, just plugged in my stuff and just away I went. Now I'm really taking into account just how everything is set up. How is the light hitting me onstage? Where are the speakers located and where is the screen located. Just always looking through every little detail has been really important for my speaking.

Carey Nieuwhof: So how do you work with that data? Maybe you get the after lunch slot or you can't see the house lights. Is this something you manipulate or just adjust based on reading the room or reading the audience? How does that work?

Chris Norton: You just ... the way you can, if there is a way to adjust it sometimes. There's just no way around it. I've been with a group where my lapel didn't work on the stage.

Carey Nieuwhof: Lapel mic?

Chris Norton: The lapel mic. In my hands, they don't work really well.

Carey Nieuwhof: You can't hold the microphone.

Chris Norton: I can't hold the mic, so just toughing it out. Just getting through it. Just trying to be ... although the audio sounded terrible. The visuals were terrible. The speaker before me and the things that they were doing before I got up there was just the most boring, dry thing in the world.

- Carey Nieuwhof: Well that always sets you up. Then you don't have to be ... you can be boring and it'll seem interesting.
- Chris Norton: Yeah exactly, which that does help, but then half the audience is asleep in their seat and it's like oh man.
- Carey Nieuwhof: I hear you.
- Chris Norton: Just getting them to re-engage and to come along with you, like all right who is this guy. There's things like that, that you just have to work through it. You've just got to focus on what you can do as a speaker, and to be your best self, because something I'm still working on is to be able to not have to depend on the audience's energy to give me the energy.
- Carey Nieuwhof: That's good.
- Chris Norton: I want to be the one to infuse the energy in the crowd. Have them come along with me versus being so dependent, so when the group is very tired, when they're hung over from the night before ... they're at a conference. How to not depend on them to give off the energy in the room.
- Carey Nieuwhof: How do you do that? How do you make sure that you bring me energy? That's a really good thought.
- Chris Norton: Well one, I videotape every single one of my presentations so I can analyze and look back on how I performed, how the energy I gave off. So I can see the differences from the different groups. The groups obviously with the great lighting, the great AV team, the great visuals, they had a drum line right before I came onstage, just seeing how I delivered those lines is my basis for how I should deliver every line. Just like getting that engraved in your head and just understand how you did it that time and to repeat that for when the group is ... before you even get up there is already asleep. Just a mental muscle memory kind of thing for me.
- Carey Nieuwhof: What's the best thing that's happened to you because of your injury?
- Chris Norton: I would say meeting Emily. I think I met Emily because of my injury. It was the fact that she was really curious about my injury. It was the curiosity. I wasn't just a regular able-bodied person. That just struck a chord with her. She is an incredible woman, just wonder woman without the cape. I wouldn't be where I'm at without her. She's definitely my better half.
- Carey Nieuwhof: What would you say to someone who is completely discouraged right now? Maybe because of something physical they're facing, but half of life is emotional. It could just be wow they're depressed right now, or things aren't going well at work or at home, and they're just discouraged. What would you say to them?

Chris Norton: I would say to just keep going. You just don't stop. Don't be stagnant. You have to just move forward. Even if it's just a baby step. Even if it's just going out for a walk outside of your house or getting the fresh air, or just reading a couple of paragraphs, or writing a couple of paragraphs, it's just like those little baby steps, those little baby actions of doing things and taking that action and focusing on what you can do. I think it just begins to slowly lift that cloud, and it will give you the encouragement to do maybe a little bit more the next day. So just taking those baby steps, taking one step in front of the other.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well your book is out today. It's called The Seven Longest Yards. It's something you and Emily wrote together. Forward is by Tim Tebow. True?

Chris Norton: That's correct, yes.

Carey Nieuwhof: Tell us about the media tour as it's starting. You'll be on Good Morning America today on podcast release day, book release day. What else in the works for the book?

Chris Norton: Right now we're building around that day and that big event. We're going to do a couple of book signings back in Iowa, some things in Florida, which is where we live now, and a couple of talk shows. We did Life Today taping in Dallas. We're starting to build up those pieces. We just feel good about the messages and the impact that this book can have on other people. The title is The Seven Longest Yards, but the walk down the aisle was the easiest part of my story. That part was not hard at all. Like I said, I could have walked 14 yards, but it's just everything leading up to that moment was really where the struggle and where the heart of this book is at.

Carey Nieuwhof: What's your greatest hope that the book will do?

Chris Norton: That it just gives the hopeless hope. That it just encourages that person to take one step in front of the other. That they just keep going, even if they don't know where they're going. That's really my hope for it.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well Chris, I'm really excited to know you, excited to have you on the show. If people want to learn more, obviously they can get the book anywhere on Amazon, The Seven Longest Yards, but if they want to find you, do you have a website or a place where it's easy to follow and connect?

Chris Norton: Yeah [chrisnorton.org](http://chrisnorton.org) is my website, and then I'm also active on social media. My handle across all my social media platforms is [chrisanorton16](https://twitter.com/chrisanorton16).

Carey Nieuwhof: Right. Chris, thank you so much. Congratulations and so encouraged by your story.

Chris Norton: Thank you, Carey. Appreciate it.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well that is a powerful, powerful story, and Chris is just one of the good guys. And congratulations, Chris and Emily, on the release of your book today. We are so excited for that. Make sure you check it out. All the details are in the show notes at [careynieuwhof.com/episode276](http://careynieuwhof.com/episode276), or just go to [leadlikeneverbefore.com](http://leadlikeneverbefore.com) and Google Chris Norton's name, and you'll find it there in a cute little search bar up at the top.

Carey Nieuwhof: We also have transcripts and the whole deal, and quotes you can share on social, and so much more. I know a lot of you love drilling into this, and today you know what? It's just like it's encouragement man. It's encouragement. Next week I am back with Sam Collier. We're going to talk about how to find your voice, build a platform, and stay true to yourself and how to handle feedback and criticism. Sam has blown up over the last five years. He's become a really, really good friend. He had no platform five years ago. He's all over the world on major stages. We're going to talk about that journey.

Carey Nieuwhof: Here's an excerpt from next week's episode.

Sam Collier: I had to first go do I like me? Like what do I like about me? What do I enjoy? You know that's a hard line because-

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh yeah.

Sam Collier: -there will be people that don't like you, and the things that you like about you, they won't like. But you have to like it anyway. You know what I'm saying?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, yeah. Oh I'm so glad to have my good friend, Sam, back. So that's next week. Hey, if you haven't yet checked out the amazing offer that Church Community Builder has, 20% off to listeners of this podcast, go to [churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey](http://churchcommunitybuilder.com/carey). And make sure you check out the incredible work that Pro Media Fire has been doing for the church at [promediafire.com/carey](http://promediafire.com/carey).

Carey Nieuwhof: Let's hang out on the Instas this summer. I'm Carey Nieuwhof there. I would love to connect with you. Thank you for sharing. Thank you for rating and reviewing this podcast. And thanks for subscribing. It's always free to you and I can't wait to be back next week with Sam Collier. It's a double episode week. Ian Morgan Cron is back. It's a lot of fun, but a lot more on the enneagram, which is going to be amazing. Thanks so much for listening, guys, and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before.

Announcer: You've been listening to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change, and personal growth, to help you lead like never before.