

TOP NEWS

FROM SHOCK TO HOPE



Neto Ribeiro, wearing sunglasses to cover the damage to his eyes, sits beside his girlfriend, Roberta Porto, on Friday. Todd Korol, Reuters

Despite his injury, Neto Ribeiro says he has fallen in love with Canada and its people

Anger, bitterness nowhere to be found



VALERIE FORTNEY

A beautiful young couple pause to brush hands, their bright smiles filling a room with levity and laughter.

It's the kind of scene played out every day, the kind we come to expect from those in love and with their whole lives ahead of them.

But on Friday afternoon in a cramped room at Calgary Police headquarters, it's a welcome bit out of the blue.

If Jose Ribamar Ribeiro Neto and his girlfriend, Roberta Porto, stayed somber throughout their entire 40-minute news conference, no one would have blamed them.

For what happened to them on the evening of Sept. 16 plays like a horror film. After enjoying dinner in Calgary's Chinatown, the pair headed back to their inner-city home.

As they walked through a downtown park, a fight broke out nearby. Shots were fired and one of them hit Ribeiro — a 24-year-old Brazilian student here to study English — square in the face.

The young man lived, but at a price most of us can barely stand to imagine. He lost both eyes, and is now blind.

On Friday afternoon, Ribeiro, accompanied by Porto and his parents, newly arrived from Brazil to be at their son's side, spoke publicly for the first time about his ordeal and his life-altering injuries.

These of us gathered are braced for the inevitable sadness that will shroud the room as Ribeiro recounts his nightmarish experience. But what we don't expect is the gracefulness with which he takes on his unenviable task.

His English may be far from perfect, but the handsome young man sitting at the microphone-filled table, white-framed sunglasses covering the devastation underneath, communicates



Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald
Antonio Carlos Ribeiro, Neto's father, said he is "still a bit shocked" by the events.

his sentiments eloquently through both words and his gentle demeanour.

He steels his jaw as he recalls the flash of light, his last memory of sight, when the bullet hit him. "I just heard something loud, felt something in my head," he says. He also knew at that moment he was blind, perhaps permanently.

But he quickly moves on from that topic. Clearly, he wants to talk more about the good, the country he fell in love with in his more than six months here, the people who have helped him and Porto as they navigate their way through this tragedy — and how things could have been so much worse.

"Canada was amazing for me," says Ribeiro, who adds he will always cherish the memory of seeing Banff, Lake Louise and Jasper. "To live with the people who live here ... to see everything we see in the movies ... it was great for my life."

He also spends time thanking everyone, from the local Brazilian community association and the CNIB to hospital staff, the police and ordinary citizens from across the country, many of whom have donated money to help him and his family with expenses.

"I'm so thankful for Calgar-



Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald
Roberta Porto watches her boyfriend, Neto, address the media and try to make sense of the tragedy that stole his sight.



Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald
Maria Teresa Ribeiro holds back her emotions Friday.

ans," he says. "They're like angels."

As he speaks, it becomes clear this very public appearance from a bystander caught in the crossfire is an act of healing — more for the rest of us, perhaps, than the victim himself.

"I could be in a graveyard right now," he tells the crowd of media assembled, as if to offer comfort. "I can hug my parents ... I can stay with everyone I love."

His loved ones offer similar words of gratitude and hope. "We'd like to thank everyone," says mom Maria Teresa Ribeiro. "We're here to give him strength."

Dad Antonio Carlos Ribeiro admits to being "still a bit shocked" over the tragedy, but makes a point to tell reporters the family "has been really welcomed here in Canada," and his son will start a new life with his loved ones at his side.

Porto offers words of hope for her beloved boyfriend of three years.

"I can touch his hand, I can hug him," she says as she rubs

FROM A SHOOTING: 'I had my plans, like most people'

"I think I'm going to die," Ribeiro responded.

"No, you're talking to me," said Porto.

"I'm going to be blind," Porto told her boyfriend to sit down and began to yell, but no one was around.

"Telefoner a policia," she yelled in Portuguese into the Calgary night.

As Neto sat and waited, a passerby called 911. Police and EMS were quick to arrive.

Ribeiro said emergency crews talked to him all the way to the hospital.

He thought: "If I'm not dying, I'm blind."

Doctors later left him with some hope he might retain vision in one eye, but would require surgery.

A doctor's test, however, did not bode well.

"He put a light in my eyes and I was worried because I couldn't see anything," said Ribeiro.

When he awoke from his surgery Sept. 19, doctors informed him both his eyes had to be removed and he would need prosthetics.

"I was mad. Not mad, but sad," he said.

"I didn't die. That's what matters."

While he lay in his hospital bed, Porto — whom he met at a Fortaleza beach three years ago this weekend — said she prayed.

"Whenever I get sad, I'm always thinking at least he's here," she said.

By the weekend, his parents, Maria Teresa Ribeiro and Antonio Carlos Ribeiro, had arrived at his bedside after visa issues kept them back home for days. His two younger brothers stayed in Fortaleza.

His parents told him they loved him and everything would be alright.

"I didn't know that I could cry because I have no eyes," he said.

"I just hugged them as long as I could. That was perfect."

While Jose Ribamar Ribeiro Neto, his full Brazilian name, was in hospital, his story made its way to city leaders.

Political debate was already raging as Calgary police and Mayor Dave Bronconnier were in talks with the provincial government for an additional 200 officers on Calgary streets.

Police Chief Rick Hanson had previously voiced his fear that escalating gun violence in the city would claim an innocent victim.

The day after Ribeiro's shooting, Hanson and Bronconnier addressed the media, the mayor calling the bystander's shooting "a dark day" in Calgary's history.

Sixty-five officers were directly or indirectly involved in the case, which resulted in the arrest of Roland Warawa, who previously served time in prison for shooting a jewelry store owner in 1997.

Seated in Calgary police headquarters on Friday, Ribeiro profusely thanked everyone who has helped him,

How you can help

The Brazilian Community Association of Alberta is raising money to help Jose Ribamar Ribeiro Neto.

Money will be used to help pay for family travel expenses, for medical bills and to offset costs associated with his new blindness.

Donations can be made at any HSBC location. The account number is: 029-547423-080

Cheques can be made out to the Brazilian Community Association of Alberta and should be directed to "Jose Neto's fund."

even calling Calgarians his "angels."

No two stories of blindness are alike, but Calgarian Mike Hamblly, 37, said he feels for Ribeiro.

Hamblly was 23 when he was in a truck accident that left him permanently blind.

His sudden injury, coupled with his new paralysis, meant having to learn everything anew. Everything.

"The first couple years are pretty tough. I'm not going to dispute that. And there's days where I still get frustrated," Hamblly said, noting he'd still love to take his truck out for a drive.

But over the years he persisted. Hamblly finished high school courses, then got a degree in social work.

He now works full time at the Canadian Paraplegic Association and has a family. He hopes his new business — he adds Braille to business cards — will flourish and said his life is really just average.

To the public, he says his message is there is life after sudden blindness. To Ribeiro, Hamblly advised he learn to adjust so he can do the same things as always.

"Keep doing the things you did before," he said.

Ribeiro plans to go back home to Brazil, but said it's too early to say what will happen next.

He came to Calgary with two years of university studies in international business remaining to complete back home. He was going to study English and Spanish and would later travel to Europe for his studies.

"I had my plans, like most people."

"It's like someone took my plans and mixed them up. Erased them."

"It may be me upset a little bit, but not a lot."

Ribeiro admits there is a lot to learn and a lot of adjustment ahead as he adapts to his new life. He doesn't have many answers about what's next.

He is, however, already seeing the event as something that could have had a different ending.

"It could have been worse, but it wasn't," he said. "I could be in the graveyard right now."

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