

Built to Rise

The Story of J.R. Litehiser

J.R. Litehiser's life is a story of service, survival, reinvention, family, and the determination to move forward when everything changes.

Throughout his adult working life, J.R. has been an educator, law-enforcement officer, decorative concrete contractor, insurance agent, construction materials distributor, father, husband, and survivor. Today, he is the owner of **Pacific Northwest Epoxy and Coating Supplies (PNW ECS)**.

Each chapter of his life has helped shape the businessman, leader, and person he is today.

Early Life and Education

J.R. Litehiser was born in San Francisco, California, in 1975. He eventually attended St. Ignatius College Preparatory, where the foundations of service and education became deeply imprinted on his character and outlook on life.

After graduating from high school in 1993, J.R. attended Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA from 1993 to 1997. He earned two bachelor's degrees—one in American Literature and another in Sociology—along with his Secondary Education credentials for teaching high school.

In 1997, J.R. began his teaching career in St. Helens, Oregon. The following year, he enrolled at the University of Portland to continue his education. He later earned a Master's Degree in education, focusing on Curriculum Development and School Administration. All the while applying for different Federal Law Enforcement Agencies.

After completing his graduate studies, he left teaching and began a career in law enforcement.

A Career in Law Enforcement

J.R. spent four years serving with the City of Bellevue before joining the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office, where he served for another year.

During his law-enforcement career, he's been a Defensive Tactics Coordinator, a member of the Riot Team, participated in Dignitary Protection and worked extensively in nighttime traffic enforcement and accident reconstruction.

Law enforcement taught J.R. discipline, accountability, awareness, and how to remain composed under pressure. At the time, he could not have known how important those lessons would become later in his life.

Entering the Concrete Industry

After leaving law enforcement, J.R. became a decorative concrete contractor in 2005. He built his livelihood through hands-on work, industry knowledge, and a strong commitment to his craft.

In 2008, J.R. began building a construction materials distribution business. He saw an opportunity to use his experience differently by helping contractors obtain the right products and technical information for their projects.

That same year, in a matter of moments, his life changed completely.

The Accident That Changed His Life

In May 2008, J.R. was severely injured in a chemical explosion. He suffered second- and third-degree burns over approximately 80% of his body and remained in a coma for eight weeks. The severity of his injuries ultimately resulted in the amputation of his right hand.

J.R. remained in the hospital from May 2008 until January 2009—approximately eight months—and then spent another two months in rehabilitation.

Surviving the explosion was only the beginning. When J.R. woke up, he had to face a life that looked completely different from the one he had known. Everyday tasks became challenges, and the career he had spent years building could no longer continue in the same way.

His physical recovery was long and difficult, but the emotional and financial struggles were just as significant. J.R. did not have health insurance and was unable to return to his former work for an extended period. At the same time, the national economy was experiencing a major downturn, making an already difficult situation even harder.

During this period, J.R.'s personal life also changed. His marriage ended, and he became a single father to his son, Owen. He was recovering from life-altering injuries, dealing with financial uncertainty, and learning how to raise his son while rebuilding their lives.

There were many reasons for J.R. to feel defeated, but he knew he still had responsibilities, opportunities, and people worth fighting for.

Building a Business from a Hospital Bed

Even while hospitalized, J.R. refused to give up on the distribution business he had started.

At the beginning, the operation consisted of J.R., a laptop, and a telephone in his hospital room. He made cold calls, developed customer relationships, and sold construction materials directly from his hospital bed.

During the company's first year, J.R. generated approximately \$60,000 in sales. It was a modest amount compared with where the company is today, but it represented something far more important at the time: proof that he could still build a future.

The accident changed how J.R. worked, but it did not erase his experience, determination, or passion for the industry. Instead, it challenged him to find a different way to contribute.

Reinventing His Career

J.R. could no longer rely on his physical abilities in the way he once had, so he began thinking about how he could apply his knowledge and experience differently. The ol' adage is, "Those that can, Do. Those that can't, Teach."

In 2010, J.R. returned to construction materials distribution full-time. This allowed him to use the industry knowledge and relationships he had developed throughout his career while serving contractors in a new capacity.

From 2010 through 2025, the company operated from one location. During those years, J.R. focused on building strong customer relationships, expanding the company's product knowledge, supporting contractors, and developing a team that shared his commitment to service.

What began with one person, a laptop, and a telephone in a hospital room gradually became **Pacific Northwest Epoxy and Coating Supplies**, better known as **PNW ECS**.

Growing Pacific Northwest Epoxy and Coating Supplies

Under J.R.'s leadership, PNW ECS has grown from approximately \$60,000 in first-year sales into a thriving construction materials distribution company.

The company now employs approximately 12 people and operates two locations, with plans to expand further. PNW ECS is on track to approach approximately \$6.5 million in annual sales.

This growth did not happen overnight. It represents years of persistence, customer service, relationship-building, industry knowledge, and a willingness to continue moving forward through uncertainty.

J.R. did not simply return to the construction industry after his accident. He reinvented his place within it. Instead of allowing his physical limitations to end his career, he used his knowledge and experience to create a company that supports contractors and provides specialized products, equipment, and technical guidance.

PNW ECS stands as a reflection of J.R.'s resilience and entrepreneurial vision. It is also evidence of what can be built when someone refuses to let tragedy determine the rest of his life.

Learning to Live Differently

Today, J.R. uses a myoelectric prosthetic hand, which he describes as “awesome.” To him, it represents more than technology—it symbolizes independence, progress, and the ability to continue living life on his own terms.

Adapting to a prosthetic hand has required patience and persistence, but it has also shown J.R. what is possible when determination and innovation come together.

His scars are also an important part of his story. J.R. does not want them hidden or digitally removed. They are visible reminders of what he survived and of the effort it took to rebuild his life. They do not represent weakness; they represent endurance.

Humor has played an important role in his recovery. J.R. does not minimize the seriousness of his injuries, but he refuses to allow tragedy to control the way he experiences the rest of his life.

He is not simply the man who survived an explosion or lost his right hand. He is an educator, former law-enforcement officer, father, husband, business owner, survivor, and someone who continues to grow.

Family and a New Beginning

One of the greatest parts of J.R.'s journey has been building a new life with his high-school sweetheart, Gillian. Together, they have formed a family with their children and created a new chapter grounded in love, support, and shared experiences.

Family has given J.R. purpose throughout every stage of his journey. Becoming a single father to Owen during one of the most difficult periods of his life taught him that strength is not only about enduring pain. It is also about continuing to show up for the people who depend on him.

The family J.R. has today reminds him that even after tremendous loss, life can still offer connection, happiness, and unexpected new beginnings.

Sharing His Story

J.R. has also explored opportunities in acting and motivational speaking. Sharing his experiences gives him an opportunity to show others that life can continue after tragedy. I've given presentations to all manner of crowds; small to large audiences; Clinicians, Wounded Warriors, Fire Fighters, Burn Survivors, and Children programs.

Circumstances may change, and carefully made plans may disappear, but it is still

possible to create a meaningful future. J.R. hopes his story can encourage people facing injuries, loss, career changes, or circumstances that seem impossible to overcome.

Moving Forward

J.R.'s journey continues. He remains committed to his family, the growth of PNW ECS, and finding meaningful ways to use his experiences to help and inspire others.

His story is a reminder that a devastating event does not have to be the final chapter. Recovery may take time, and the road forward may look completely different from the road left behind. That does not mean the new path cannot lead somewhere worthwhile.

J.R. survived. He adapted. He rebuilt.

What began with a laptop and a telephone in a hospital bed has grown into Pacific Northwest Epoxy and Coating Supplies—a company with approximately 12 employees, two locations, plans for continued expansion, and annual sales approaching \$6.5 million.

Most importantly, J.R. kept moving forward.

J.R. Litehiser: Timeline of Key Events

- **1975:** Born in San Francisco, California.
- **1993:** Graduated from St. Ignatius College Preparatory.
- **1993–1997:** Attended Gonzaga University.
- **1997:** Earned bachelor's degrees in American Literature and Sociology, along with secondary education credentials.
- **1997:** Began teaching in St. Helens, Oregon.
- **1998:** Began graduate studies at the University of Portland.
- **Graduate Education:** Earned a master's degree in education focused on curriculum development and school administration.
- **Law Enforcement:** Served for four years with the City of Bellevue.
- **Deschutes County:** Served for one year with the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office.
- **Specialized Experience:** Defensive tactics, dignitary protection, riot-team operations, nighttime traffic enforcement, and accident reconstruction.
- **2005:** Became a decorative concrete contractor.
- **2008:** Started a construction materials distribution business.
- **May 2008:** Suffered catastrophic injuries in a chemical explosion.
- **2008:** Sustained second- and third-degree burns over approximately 80% of his body and remained in a coma for eight weeks.
- **May 2008–January 2009:** Spent approximately eight months in the hospital.
- **2009:** Completed approximately two additional months of rehabilitation.
- **During Hospitalization:** Continued developing the distribution business using a laptop, telephone, cold calling, and direct sales.
- **First Year:** Generated approximately \$60,000 in sales.
- **2010:** Returned to construction materials distribution full-time.
- **2010–2025:** Operated the business from one location.
- **Current Operations:** Owner of Pacific Northwest Epoxy and Coating Supplies, operating from two locations with plans for continued expansion.
- **Current Team:** Approximately 12 employees.
- **Current Business Outlook:** PNW ECS is on track to approach approximately \$6.5 million in annual sales.
- **Personal Life:** Father to Owen and husband to his high-school sweetheart, Gillian.

- **Today:** Owner of PNW ECS, business leader, survivor, aspiring actor, and motivational speaker.