

Beating the odds After car accident, Alstead teen walks again

Sarah Palermo
Sentinel Staff

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Matthew Pratt, left, and his mother Joan at Crotched Mountain Rehabilitation Center in Greenfield. Though he doesn't remember days passing as he lay in a coma after a car accident in Langdon, Matthew said he does remember hearing his mother's voice.
STEVE HOOPER / Sentinel Staff

More than 20 fractured bones. Two dislocated clavicles. Multiple breaks in his right arm and wrist. A pelvis broken in two places, and a fracture in his neck at the critical point that could have cut off his ability to breathe.

On top of those injuries and others, it was the massive amounts of blood loss and brain damage that had doctors the most worried about Matthew W. Pratt after the car he was traveling in hit a telephone pole on Cheshire Turnpike July 2.

The EMTs told Joan M. Pratt that her then-15-year-old son might not survive the helicopter ride from Langdon to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon.

"I said, 'No. My boy is going to live,'" Pratt recalled, remembering the night she got what she called the worst phone call of her life.

"I had to keep saying that to them, because it was what I had to believe."

On Friday, just over 12 weeks after the accident, Matthew defied the odds and walked through the front door of his Alstead home.

He's been home a few weekends in the past month, but this time is different. This time he's home to stay.

Four days after the accident, Matthew turned 16, and his family gathered around his hospital bed to sing, not knowing if he would ever wake up.

Over the next few weeks, while Matthew lay in critical condition in a coma in Lebanon, Pratt was given the worst possible prognosis by the doctors.

She was told that her son might not come out of the coma he was in. And if he did, the doctors said, he might not be the same boy again.

When he did awaken, 27 days after the accident, his mother was told he might not walk or talk again.

But according to his physical therapist, Judy A. Ilaqua, Matthew has had the kind of progress they only see once in a while at Crotched Mountain Rehabilitation Center in Greenfield.

Crotched Mountain is a nonprofit organization that houses a school, hospital, outpatient clinic, brain injury center and an athletic complex for people with disabilities and their families.

When he started to recover from the coma, Matthew was still suffering from massive brain trauma that caused, among other things, his muscles to seize into tense positions.

At first, just sitting up in his wheelchair for half an hour caused him pain and discomfort.

But when Matthew's friend Caleb J. Perham, 17, came home from basic training at an Army base in Texas, Matthew decided it was time to get up and go home himself.

"I said I would get out of here in 30 days," Matthew said of his decision to go home.

"And I'm doing it."

His recovery has meant a lot of hard work, from himself, his mother and the team of therapists at Crotched Mountain.

"There were times when both of his thighs were shaking, and we had to tell him to stop and rest. He always wanted to keep working," Ilaqua said.

With some patients, Ilaqua said, therapists can see improvement from week to week. Others improve from day to day.

Matthew has made progress from morning to afternoon.

With smiles on their faces, friends and family said that Matthew was too stubborn to stay in a wheelchair once he made up his mind to walk.

"If you knew him before the accident, you wouldn't be surprised," Caleb said.

According to Caleb, Matthew once made them both 45 minutes late for school because he wanted to iron his clothes, but has always steadfastly refused to clean his room.

Matthew has had two therapy sessions on some days, in order to keep pace with his progress.

"He would take what we did in the morning and work it into his movements and by the afternoon we could move forward again," Ilaqua said.

At first, Ilaqua said, it was hard to convey her high hopes to Pratt, who had been given such a dismal picture at first.

Once she understood the potential for progress her son had, Pratt became intimately involved in the therapy.

She has barely left Matthew's side since the accident, sleeping at the hospital in Lebanon, and then at Crotched Mountain. The first time she went home to Alstead since July 2 was when Matthew was released for the weekend earlier this month.

He went on an apple-picking trip during his last week at Crotched Mountain, and she let him go with just his occupational therapist, Lauren A. Smith, and other staff members, she said.

While Pratt has been sleeping at Crotched Mountain, her husband, Michael A. Pratt Sr., has been holding down the fort at home, and driving up from Alstead every day.

Both Michael and Joan Pratt work for the Wildlife Conservation Trust, and Michael Pratt has been doing Joan Pratt's job on top of his while she stays at Matthew's side.

"Definitely having the ability to be here every day, having a family that could do this, helped Matt," Ilaqua said.

"And now, it's not going to be like they are trying to learn an entire course in two days getting ready to go home. They are ready for him," she said.

Joan Pratt's method of speaking with people has changed over the course of Matthew's therapy. If someone asks her a question, she asks Matthew, prompting him to answer and improve his cognitive and speaking skills.

There were many milestones along the way: his first steps after the accident, the first time he climbed stairs, the first time he could speak.

Often, Matthew's progress brought tears of joy to her eyes, Pratt said.

"Matt would see me crying, and I couldn't explain enough that they were happy tears," she said.

At first, Matthew couldn't lift his arms to hug his mom, so he would ask her to hug him, thinking it would make her feel better, Pratt said.

"I am so proud of my son," she said with a smile.

Matthew was 15 at the time of the accident. He and his friend Charles Knight went out for a ride in Knight's 1994 Suzuki Swift, the first drive Knight, who had just gotten his driver's license, would take in a car with a standard transmission.

Driving north on Cheshire Turnpike, the car went off the right side of the road at the intersection with Lower Cemetery Road, according to police, and the passenger side of the car struck a telephone pole.

Knight has visited Matthew throughout his recovery, Pratt said, and brought a special gift recently after he was allowed to see the remains of his Suzuki for the first time since the accident. The car has been in state police custody since the accident as part of the investigation.

The night of the accident, Matthew had been wearing his favorite hat, a faded black cap with a Fox Racing dirt bike racing logo that he called his "lucky hat" before the accident. Knight brought him the hat when he came to visit.

"It's my lucky hat now for sure. It saved my butt. It saved my head," Matthew said.

According to Pratt, when Matthew left the night of the accident, he told her he would call home in an hour.

She was the kind of mother who always wanted to know where her three kids were going, including Michael A. Pratt, 18, and Mariah A. Pratt, 14, and when they would be back.

Matthew was always different, though, she said. While her other children were close with their family, and Matthew went out with friends as much as any other 15-year-old, he still made time for mowing the lawn with his father, or just hanging out with mom.

“He was the one who always gave me a kiss and ‘I love you, mom,’ before he went out the door,” Pratt said.

Sitting in a recreation room at Crotched Mountain, the family joked that maybe it was Joan Pratt’s voice that woke Matthew up from the coma.

Though he doesn’t remember the days passing as he lay in Lebanon, Matthew said that he remembers hearing his mother’s voice.

“You probably got sick of hearing me nagging you,” Pratt said, laughing.

These days, the Pratts are surrounded by laughter, which they say means things are back to normal.

The ability to understand humor and make jokes is often lost when a person suffers massive brain trauma like Matthew’s, according to staff at Crotched Mountain.

But when speech therapist David J. Hajjar started working with him, he was joking and laughing soon after they started.

“I look like crap there, huh?” Matthew said while looking at pictures of himself in the coma or in his wheelchair.

For many patients, brain trauma stunts impulse inhibition, and when he was relearning to walk and talk, Matthew often blurted out curse words instead of just thinking them.

Now, his medical team said, he has started joking “but I have brain trauma,” looking for mercy when he slips.

Matthew plans to go back to Crotched Mountain once a month to visit those who have helped him.

He is also planning to go back to Fall Mountain Regional High School in January as a junior, and has been taking lessons with a tutor so that he will not fall behind his classmates.

His ATV has been waiting at home, where only his father is allowed to touch it. He can’t wait to start taking drivers’ education classes, when he gets cleared by doctors and therapists.

And he said he’s been telling Kenny, a friend at Crotched Mountain who is in a wheelchair, to be stubborn.