



HIGHLIGHTS:

This Mother's Day will hold special meaning for a Huntington Beach family. Their daughter is recovering from brain injuries sustained in a 2004 near-fatal automobile accident, and the girl's father is recovering from Prostate cancer surgery.

PARENTS AND BROTHER RALLY TO "BRING BACK" 20-YEAR-OLD SUFFERING BRAIN INJURY IN CAR CRASH

LOS ANGELES (April 18, 2006) – Although they didn't know it back in July of 2004, Wendell and Lori Sparks, Huntington Beach, CA, were about to start living every parent's worst nightmare. Initially, they weren't concerned when their 20-year-old daughter, Linda, did not come home after a birthday party. They knew she sometimes stayed over at a friend's house if she was going to be out late, and were sure she would be back in time to teach her swimming class and accomplish everything else on her packed agenda. She always was.

But the student teacher whose infectious smile and shining personality had earned her the nickname "Miss Sparkle" from her second grade students was not at a friend's house that night. Indeed, she was barely alive after a horrific automobile accident on the I-10 freeway and was undergoing emergency brain surgery at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

It was not until the next afternoon that her parents learned that anything was amiss, and the news was devastating. The bones around their daughter's left eye were shattered, as were her sinuses and pelvis. Her nose was broken. But no trauma was as worrisome as that which was inflicted on her brain. Moise Danielpour, M.D., pediatric neurosurgeon at Cedars-Sinai's Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute removed a flap of bone from Linda's skull to prevent additional brain injury as the swelling and bleeding continued. He administered medication to induce a coma that would reduce blood flow and intracranial pressure.

"Initially, we had no way of knowing if Linda would survive. We didn't know if she would ever wake up," Danielpour recalls.

As medications and operations sustained Linda's tentative hold on life, monitors and imaging scans measured and documented her existence. Her care was coordinated by a team of specialists in trauma, intensive care, craniofacial surgery, plastic surgery, neurosurgery, and primary care. But what she needed most in her fight, says Danielpour, were age-old remedies: rest, time and family.

"It was not that we did anything that other neurosurgeons would not do. Linda's story is not about special equipment or unique interventions," he says. "It is about someone who was really loved and about a whole family being involved in this young woman's life being saved. Her mother, a nurse herself, immersed herself in Linda's care. She put pictures of this beautiful girl all over the intensive care unit – this beautiful girl with all the facial fractures and terrible cuts and bruises all over her face – and she made sure everyone remembered that this was a person. And this girl, who no one thought would wake up, woke up."

It was a gradual awakening, almost imperceptible at first. Several weeks after the accident, Linda occasionally opened her eyes for a few minutes at a time. She was unable to speak and is permanently nearly blind in her left eye because of several small strokes she suffered as a result of the accident. But about five weeks post-injury, she appeared to recognize an out-of-state aunt. And a few mornings later, she responded for the first time to what had become a daily verbal test: "Hold up two fingers."

"That was huge," says her mom. "For all the damage to her brain, she could process that request."

Linda was transferred out of the intensive care unit 35 days after the accident. She started the long process of speech and physical therapy at Cedars-Sinai before moving to a rehabilitation center closer to home. Over time, she progressed from a wheelchair to a walker to a quad cane to walking on her own. And today she is enrolled in a two-year program for people who have sustained brain injuries. It is held at Coastline Community College – a different campus but the same school where Linda used to teach swimming.

Danielpour does not predict, one way or the other, whether Linda, now 22, could yet realize her dream of teaching kindergarten. Here, after all, is a young woman who appeared to have little chance of surviving catastrophic injuries. "Today she is walking and talking," he points out. "She has had some memory problems that are continuing to improve, but she is healing. She is slowly returning."

Lori and Wendell noticed early in their experience that Danielpour refused to place any limits on what they might expect of their daughter, even when Linda was battered and bandaged almost beyond recognition.

"Like the other nurses and doctors, when Dr. Danielpour walked in, he looked at her as though he knew her, not like this is the head injury in Bed 7," says Lori. "He always saw *her*. I felt that. He always treated her like our daughter who was going to be coming back." "There was a time about a week after the accident that he took my husband and me into the hall and said they had done another scan. He said, 'It looks worse than it did, and I can't guarantee that she will come out of the coma or what she'll be like when she comes out. But amazing things happen when you're young. You just never know.' He was preparing us but also giving us room to hope."

The need for hope is something Lori and Wendell knew even before Linda's accident. Their son Cody, now 19, was diagnosed at age 13 with Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. The road to diagnosis, acceptance and coping was long and difficult for the entire family, but the couple learned to lean on each other. Then, this past August, Wendell was diagnosed with prostate cancer, for which he underwent surgery earlier this year.

As for Linda, she's swimming again, and is working very hard at her Acquired Brain Injury school – even though she has had two semesters with no credit due to difficulty remembering where her homework is. She still loves music. She can speak clearly and walk well. She and her family have come to terms with the fact that she will never be exactly the way she was before the accident, but her strong spirit is undaunted. She went recently with a girlfriend to see Keith Urban in concert, and also danced at a friend's wedding.

"The important things are there," says her mom. "She's still the kind, loving, caring person that we knew before. She still has her sense of humor, and she still enjoys people in her life."

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