

Christmas a reminder of Ferguson's progress

Written by Jes-c Brandt



"It's hard to believe where she was last year," Connie Ferguson commented as she reflected on her 20-year-old daughter Brittney's progress. In a time of year that's big on family, the Fergusons have spent this holiday season thinking about how different it will be from the previous year.

Last year Christmas marked three months since Brittney's accident. She was still at Craig Hospital in Denver, and their holiday celebration was arranged around hospital schedules and policies. In stark contrast, this Thanksgiving was spent in Holyoke with family, and Brittney even ate some turkey and potatoes and gravy.

Rance, Brittney's father, recalled at this time last year doctors thought Brittney was totally deaf, blind in her right eye and that her right ankle was fused. They predicted a bleak future without sound or complete vision, and walking was beyond what they could ever hope for. But in the year since then, Brittney has proven them wrong on all three counts.

It didn't take long to realize Brittney could hear, and she began following conversations in her room, looking from person to person as they talked. Now she listens and laughs as family and friends joke around with her. Communication is still tough, her parents noted, but they know she

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can hear, and that's a big step from where they were last Christmas.

Brittney's vision isn't what it used to be before the accident, but she certainly isn't blind in one eye. After discovering Brittney retained vision in both eyes, doctors still predicted she would lose sight in one. Connie explained that even when a person has sight in both eyes, if she doesn't use them both together, the brain will stop listening to one to prevent double vision.

Clearly, if the Fergusons have learned anything, it's to expect the unexpected. As of today, Brittney still has vision in both of her eyes. In fact, her family explained, she switches from seeing with both eyes or just one, depending on what she is looking at.

The most recent source of surprise for Brittney's family was news that her ankle was not fused, as they had previously been told. Full range of motion in the ankle brought the possibility of walking even closer. Shortly after receiving this good news, Brittney went in for surgery.

Surgery was completed six weeks ago on her right Achilles tendon, her left calf and several tendons in her feet. Since then she has had neon casts on both legs, but Monday, Dec. 21, she was scheduled to have them removed.

While she still had casts on her feet, Brittney made great progress walking. Much to her parents' delight, one night at the movies as Rance was preparing to take Brittney to her seat, Brittney started taking steps. It was like she was suddenly ready, they said. Since then, Brittney has continued taking steps with the help of her family.

The use of a walker with a harness has been helpful in Brittney's process of relearning to walk. Getting started is sometimes slow, the family noted, but Brittney gave an impressive demonstration of a few sturdy steps across the living room.

It's hard to tell how walking will go after the casts are removed, but the entire family has high hopes for strengthened muscles and continued progress. Rance commented they hope to have her walk from her room to the living room, with assistance, on Christmas morning. "And I think she can do it," he added with a smile.

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While they are still in the early stages of walking, Brittney has become quite comfortable with the use of her wheelchair. She propels herself around the room, coordinating her feet and hands to get where she wants to go. In general, her movement has had phenomenal improvement over the year, and Brittney is now able to do a number of things for herself that she relied on others for last year.

Another area the Fergusons are excited to continue work on is communication. Since the accident Brittney hasn't spoken, and communication has been one of the biggest roadblocks. Over the last few months the family has worked on some basic signs for communication, including "yes," "no," "mom," "dad," "sister" and "I love you." Always big on humor, she also has a few playful signs she utilizes, such as "loser." A signed "Merry Christmas" greeting was just one more indication of Brittney's communication recovery.

Writing has been an additional means of communication the Fergusons have been working on. While it's sometimes difficult for Brittney to find the letters or words she wants to use, it's one more way for her to let people know what's going on inside her head. It's also reassuring, her mom said, to know that she can read.

Reading and writing can be tiring, so the easiest way to communicate is still by asking Brittney questions and allowing her to write or sign an answer. Regardless of the method, everyone feels a sense of satisfaction when they successfully talk with each other.

Of course, it's not all work and no play at the Ferguson house. Brittney's started playing tic-tac-toe and checkers with her friends and family. She's quite the character, and has a tendency to change the rules when they don't suit her, but even that is a sign that Brittney's still the same ornery girl she's always been. Also a lifelong dog-lover, she seems to be enjoying the company of their family dog Cooper.

As Rance, Connie and Amanda talked with Brittney and observed her actions, each took a moment to think about how much she has improved. Connie noted seeing her every day makes it easy to overlook the progress, but when they step back and look at last year's Christmas, they're amazed by how far she's come. There was a lot of crying and frustration last year, but Brittney's smile is bright for the season and this year the Fergusons are all prepared for a much happier holiday.

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Finishing her interview, Brittney and her family used a combination of writing, asking and signing to relay a message to the city of Holyoke. "Merry Christmas and thank you. Love, Brittney."