

Brittney Ferguson healing progresses at home

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

After spending close to six months in hospitals following her Sept. 25 vehicle accident, Brittney Ferguson is glad to be home.

While she doesn't talk yet, her family has skillfully learned to interpret her reactions to assess her feelings. And they remain steadily by her side to assist her progress in any way they can.

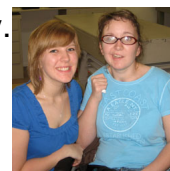
She is more relaxed and calmer, has been sleeping well and laughs much more, said Brittney's mother, Connie. "All of us are just so glad to be home," she added.

Life as they knew it changed suddenly for the Ferguson family six months ago on Sept. 25 when Brittney, a student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, was seriously injured in an auto accident.

Her parents Rance and Connie, as well as 17-year-old sister Amanda, have been by her side every step of the way.

While hospitalized and later in rehab at Craig Hospital, Brittney has had the comfort of her parents and sister.

On March 1, Rance returned to his job at Highline Electric Association, and the rest of the Fergusons moved home March 11. Amanda returned to HHS in her junior year and Connie resigned her position with USDA in Imperial, Neb. to remain home with Brittney.



Family and community support have contributed greatly, Connie acknowledged. "We wouldn't be where we are if it weren't for all the support."

Initially told it would be baby steps of progress, Connie said this week it is certainly a marathon, not a sprint. "They weren't lying," she added.

Doctors anticipate Brittney will continue to heal and improve for at least the next two years before they will see a plateau. Even then, she will still continue to progress.

That's the first prognosis of sorts the family has received, and they continue to hope and pray. At this point, Connie said they pray every day that today will be the day Brittney says a word.

Shortly after their arrival home close to a month ago, on March 11, the Fergusons placed various pictures on a board—pictures of the couch, wheelchair, bed, toilet and more. If Brittney is fussy, they ask her to point to a picture.

So far, they've responded to the photo she's pointed to, and it's seemingly calmed her. As a result, they've learned a way to communicate.

Initially scheduled to return to Holyoke Feb. 20, plans changed when an aneurysm was discovered and surgery required.

Surgery did set Brittney back some, but her family has noticed recently she is getting more tongue function and control back. She continues to be fed through a tube.

She wears glasses, but they are not corrective lenses, Connie explained. A piece of tape has been placed over a portion of the right lens. Brittney had nerve damage to her right eye, and the tape forces her eye to track, in an attempt to help correct its movement.

While she is in a wheelchair, Brittney holds herself up and has fairly good balance. The right side of her body is still sluggish. Her family helps her with stretches, and they're getting her occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech therapy sessions set up regularly in their home.

Going to the therapy pool in Sterling is part of home care, and Brittney has been there a

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couple of times. Connie said she thinks her daughter likes the weightlessness in the pool. She likes the water and has even taken steps in the water.

Once last week, she tried to pull her sister in the pool. She started walking up the steps to get out and was angry her family wouldn't let her just walk out. She wrapped her legs around the rail and had to be convinced to let go and get on the lift to get out of the pool.

Connie said Brittney doesn't put much weight on her right leg, but once it's stronger, maybe she will be able to walk out of the pool or just walk in general. "But that is a ways down the road," she added.

Brittney can stand and pivot, using mostly her left leg, so she can help them get her from her wheelchair to the vehicle and other places.

She returned to Craig Hospital last Thursday, to the spasticity clinic, where she received an injection in her right arm to help with movement. Her right arm is still tight, but she is trying to move it more. Connie said she will do another round of phenol blocks to loosen up her muscles.

In fact, Connie reported the doctor said at some point he wouldn't be surprised if Brittney's right side becomes stronger than the left.

The trip back to the hospital involved a long day, and Brittney was a little agitated Friday, as a result.

However, in playful mode, with the help of her mom, she was able to get hold of a syringe and shoot water at her sister. She even soaked her mom, as well.

She helped her sister pick out the color for her date's Prom tux, but lost interest when it came time to select flowers for the Prom event.

Brittney raises her hand to give a thumbs-up, a high-five or a wave, and her spontaneous smiles provide bright spots for family and friends.

Sept. 25 accident changes life

Brittney was a back-seat passenger in a club cab pickup in which the driver lost control on a curve in Laramie Thursday, Sept. 25, and she suffered the worst injuries of the four in the vehicle. The pickup rolled three times, and Brittney was partially pinned in it and partially thrown through the back window.

A fractured skull, multiple face fractures, blown eye socket, broken ribs, as well as a fractured right ankle and foot wounds, only begin to describe Brittney's trauma.

She was flown from the hospital in Laramie to its trauma center, Med Center of the Rockies in Loveland, where right away she underwent her first of many surgeries, this one for a blood clot.

That day, her prognosis was pretty much minute by minute, as doctors were simply focused on Brittney's head injury. She was literally hanging in the balance, fighting for her life.

After almost three weeks at Med Center of the Rockies, Brittney was transferred to Kindred Hospital in Denver on Oct. 14. Her first day of breathing on her own was Oct. 25.

Various infections and other set-backs were recorded as Brittney slowly gained higher levels of consciousness. She was moved to Craig Hospital in Englewood around Nov. 18 for extensive rehab.

While there, she celebrated her 20th birthday on Jan. 27.

Originally scheduled to come home Feb. 20, Brittney's return was delayed when surgery was required at Swedish Hospital for a pseudo aneurysm. Her return to Craig was then delayed a day when she suffered from a seizure.

The trip back to Holyoke four weeks ago, on March 11, began a new phase in Brittney's journey.

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“We still don’t know the outcome or what they anticipate she will be able to overcome or do or even be like, but miracles happen every day,” said Connie. “This miracle is just a work in progress that will span over years.”