

Ferguson re-evaluated one year after accident

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Pain, happiness, gratefulness and hope only begin to describe the emotions the Ferguson family has faced in the past year. Friday, Sept. 25 marked the one-year anniversary of 20-year-old Brittney's auto accident.

Brittney, a college student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyo., was a back-seat passenger in a pickup rollover last September. Suffering multiple injuries, her recovery has been long and slow, but she continues to make baby steps in improvement.

"It is hard to think sometimes a year has gone by already, but at other times it seems like it has been longer than that," said her mom Connie. "I know one year ago we were worried we wouldn't have Brittney here to brighten our day with her smiles."

Connie, her husband Rance and daughter Amanda still question why Brittney has to endure pain and trials and what the purpose of it all is. "In those times we lean on God a little harder," said Connie.

While Brittney uses some sign language and has found ways to communicate, she has not been able to talk since her accident. "We still miss her voice," said Connie. "It is hard to believe we haven't heard a word in a year."

One year ago, the doctors told the Fergusons the Brittney they knew before the accident was gone. As she recovered, they would still see bits and pieces of the old Brittney, but she would forever be changed. Connie said, "That is true for everyone—we change every day, but it is nice to see the bits and pieces re-emerge." She noted the mischievous side of Brittney is certainly still there.

Other little things about Brittney continue to surprise her family. Her mom said Brittney hated the color pink, and she could never buy her anything that had pink on it. Now, when shopping for clothes or hats, Brittney has picked the color pink every time, and she even chose pink paint to paint her room.

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In looking back at the past year, Connie said, “We are still forever grateful and blessed to have so many people take the time to pray for Brittney this past year and for us as well.” The Fergusons are thankful for everything—the encouragement and all the gracious help they have received. “I know we would not be where we are today if it wasn’t for everything we have received!”

Having been in rehab at Craig Hospital in Englewood before coming home to Holyoke in March, Brittney recently returned to Craig for a re-evaluation. Connie said it was a long week for Brittney, and she was pretty tired every day.

Brittney has been having issues with getting a brace to hold her right foot flat. Right now she can’t stand well or even take steps walking.

Doctors at Craig have previously tried a phenol block in her right hamstring, and they also said they don’t get the results they want with Botox injections on weight bearing muscles. Connie said both of those options are out. Brittney will most likely need to have her tendons released on her right foot so it can be in the proper position for a brace to be made. Doctors will also look at her left foot to see if it needs any releases.

After muscle tests, they determined Brittney does have the muscle strength to walk, but it isn’t safe or recommended she try to walk with her foot in that position.

In the matter of Brittney’s separated shoulder, Connie said it is just something she will have to live with. The tear she has is something that isn’t fixable in the doctor’s opinion.

On a positive note, a new speech therapist said Brittney was a totally different person than what she read from the previous therapist’s notes when Brittney was an inpatient.

Brittney had another swallow test done, but Connie said it didn’t show anything they didn’t already know. It has not improved, and she will still need to use the feeding tube.

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Connie explained Brittney is apraxic. One example is verbal apraxia which is a neurological motor speech impairment that involves a breakdown in the transmission of messages from the brain to the muscles in the jaw, cheeks, lips, tongue and palate that facilitate speech. There is no obvious weakness in these muscles, and Brittney may be able to move them quite easily when not trying to speak.

Brittney also has some aphasia which is partial or total loss of the ability to articulate ideas or comprehend spoken or written language, resulting from damage to the brain caused by injury or disease. Brittney's aphasia has improved quite a bit since she was at Craig months ago, according to Connie.

"We have noticed she is getting better about writing, and you can write a question and she will usually write back an answer," said Connie. "It does seem that every day she seems to understand more and more, but it is hard for her to communicate still."

Doctors talked about getting Brittney a communication board, but if Brittney has a button to push, she will push it and keep holding it down, so they will have to work on that before a communication board would be effective.

They recommended Brittney see an ear, nose and throat doctor to check on scar tissue from her trach. They said sometimes scar tissue can grow on the vocal chords which would inhibit sounds, and if there is scar tissue there it could possibly impair her swallow as well.

Connie noted both procedures with Brittney's foot and trach scarring are outpatient procedures if they are needed. Initial consultations with those doctors will begin soon.

Additionally, Brittney's medications will be adjusted, and doctors said there shouldn't be much difference physically but her mental response time and processing should become quicker.

While Brittney has not changed much in the last couple months, Connie said she has been communicating more with writing than usual. The hard thing is she may not always know the right letters or word to use. "That is a challenge guessing what she means sometimes," she

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said.

“All in all she is holding her own—small baby steps are made in the right direction,” said Connie. “It is a long road she has ahead of her.”