

NOTE: This story won Best Feature from the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. (Please note: This story was written under my maiden name; my byline has since changed.)

A Royal welcome

Months after crash and brother's death, injured teen rejoins his family

BY JESSICA HANSEN

KENOSHA NEWS

On a cold afternoon in late December, more than 20 cars lined the street leading to the Royal family's home.

The quiet strip of 108th Avenue in Kenosha erupted with hoots, hollers and blaring horns as the family's Chevy Tahoe turned the corner from 69th Street.

Teenagers leaned out of their car windows and clapped. Family members and friends walked down the street, arms full of presents and party snacks. Dozens more gathered in the driveway.

"Hey, Case!" people shouted.

The last time so many had gathered in his name, Casey Royal, then 17, was barely alive.

It was late August. Friends and family members huddled on a dark highway, the smoke of road flares burning their lungs and stinging their eyes.

No one knew if Casey would live.

His brother, Cody Royal, 19, had already died.

The brothers were driving to the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, taking Cody, a sophomore, back to school when their van was involved in an accident with a Jeep at highways D and N in the town of Paris.

More than 200 students from four high schools came to the roadside vigil that night. Later, they went to the hospital. They held car washes and fund-raisers. They remembered both boys at sporting events. They signed cards. They cried and prayed.

Mostly, they mourned for Cody Royal and waited for Casey to come home.

Nearly four months to the day of the accident, he did.

Love and support

At times, the support was overwhelming.

Kathy Royal, the boys' mother, said, ``It's what's kept us going -- that everybody loved our kids as much as we do."

Other days, it was the view from Casey's room at Sacred Heart Memorial Hospital in Milwaukee that offered salvation.

The picture window in Casey's room overlooked Lake Michigan. Kathy Royal would look out and sigh as the wind tossed the frosted water. ``That view saved us some days," she said.

Casey -- Kathy and Craig Royal's youngest son -- spent more than three months in that room.

The room looked more like a college dormitory than part of a hospital. Handmade posters and photo collages plastered the walls. A mini-refrigerator hummed in the corner. Inside were the peanut butter cups that Casey craves.

A picture of Casey in a tuxedo, taken the day of his brother's wedding, topped a bookshelf opposite the foot of his bed. Craig and Bryanna Royal, both 23, married Aug. 2.

The shelf also held a baseball and a game ball signed by his football teammates at Bradford High School, where Casey was a pitcher and the starting middle linebacker.

A Bradford High Red Devils banner hung above his bed.

The reminders of Casey's past were meant to provide a more bearable present and inspire promises for a brighter future, but for weeks it looked as if Casey would have no future at all.

He was in a coma for a total of more than six weeks, two in the intensive care unit at Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital in Wauwatosa, then four more at Sacred Heart, where he was transferred on Sept. 26, four days before his 18th birthday.

When Casey woke up in late October he was not the Casey Royal his family knew before the accident.

Casey had few obvious injuries -- no broken bones, a few cuts. But his brain had been damaged.

``It's just like they say when you hit your head at 50 miles an hour. Your brain is like Jell-O," Kathy said.

There was no cerebral swelling, a rarity for people with brain injuries, the Royals said, which meant no permanent mental damage.

``They told us he probably wouldn't be able to smile or breathe," Kathy Royal said. ``He's breathing on his own. The best thing is, Casey seems to have all his marbles upstairs.

``It's so great that he's able to know who he is," she added. ``That was our biggest worry. That he wouldn't know who we were, let alone know who he was."

Yet more than four months after the accident, Casey can barely speak, can't walk on his own and has only limited control over his right side. "He's just starting to be able to use his hand and leg," Kathy said. His left side has remained strong.

Rehabilitation is his only option.

"It's not like a broken arm. It's not like a broken leg. It doesn't heal," his father, Craig Royal, said. "The brain re-routes. It's one day at a time."

"They say it could be up to two years," Kathy added.

A parent's nightmare

Craig and Kathy Royal, both 44, have been together since eighth grade. They married out of high school and were parents by age 20. Nine years ago, they moved from Palatine, Ill., to Kenosha.

Their more than 30 years together have, at times, been a blur of practices, play dates and parent-teacher conferences, but by last August their most frenetic days were behind them.

Craig was married, Cody was in college and Casey was a senior at Bradford. Their youngest child, Brittney Royal, 17, was a junior at the same school.

On the day of the accident, Kathy and Craig were in the back yard with Elvis, their 1-year-old Rottweiler.

Craig was laying down for a nap when the phone rang.

Since calls at home almost always were for the kids, he usually let the answering machine pick up.

This time Craig Royal picked up the telephone, just as the answering machine tape rolled.

A woman from Froedtert told Craig she thought one of his children was at the hospital.

"They wouldn't tell us what happened," Craig said. "She just said you've got to get to the hospital."

On the way to the hospital, he said, "Basically, not a word was spoken. But I did tell Kathy she should kind of prepare herself for the worst."

Days later, after they returned home, Craig checked the messages. He forgot the tape had been on during that call with the hospital.

"It recorded the whole thing," Craig said. "Sometimes I would just listen to it to make sure it was real."

“It's amazing,” he added. “Five seconds, five minutes and you're whole life can change.”

The boys had probably driven to Whitewater about four times that week, but they never drove the route they took Aug. 31.

“We kind of figure they were on their way back home because Casey left his wallet at home,” Kathy said. “We couldn't understand why they went that way, but they probably made a circle.”

After the accident, Kathy said, “We asked daily, ‘Why? How could something happen?’ ”

Kathy Royal also has thought about what didn't happen, most notably, she and her husband could have been in the car.

“We begged them to let us take him,” she said.

“There were supposed to be two other kids in the car,” Craig said, but they never showed up.

“Those things that could have gone wrong and haven't are like cushions,” Kathy said. “It's someone's way of saying, ‘It's going to be hard, but it could have been worse.’ ”

But not much worse. “The saddest thing about the whole thing is we had Casey up in Milwaukee and Cody was down at the coroner's in Kenosha,” Craig said. “We didn't know where to be, what to do.”

Mourning a son, brother

Craig and Kathy often think about the day their child died.

The morning of the accident, Cody had crawled into bed with his parents. “He did it all the time, just for back scratches,” Kathy said. “(He'd) push the dog off the bed as if to say, it's his turn.”

Those who knew Cody Royal describe him as affectionate and unafraid to show love. He hugged his family, kissed his parents, cuddled and didn't care what people thought.

“How many 19-year-olds do you know who do that?” his mother asked. She added, “He was the lover in the family.”

Cody was especially close to his siblings. He played organized sports with both his brothers -- golf with Craig and baseball with Casey. Cody and Casey played for the same school -- Cody on varsity and Casey on junior varsity -- as recently as 2002, the year Cody graduated from Bradford.

Telling Casey his brother had died was heartbreaking.

“We brought him home on Thanksgiving (for a visit) and for the first time he asked where Cody was,” Craig said.

They found the words to tell him, but Craig and Kathy can't bear to repeat them. They said there were a lot of tears. There are still a lot of tears, just at the thought.

“I guess I'm kind of getting used to crying,” Craig said later. “The only thing we're sure of in life is you never run out of tears. Every night we cry about it, there's no kidding anybody about that.”

Christmas also was difficult. The cold, windy day was the first time Casey visited his brother's grave.

Brittney tries not to think of what her family lost. “You've just got to know you can't take it back,” she said. “So, you've got to live with what you've got.”

“It's sad to say, but with Cody there was nothing else we could do,” Craig said. “So, we turned all our attention to Casey.”

Working toward recovery

Now that their son is home to stay, Craig and Kathy know their work has just begun.

In some ways, the first four months have been practice.

For 10 days after the accident, the Royals slept on chairs in their son's hospital room. Even after they started sleeping at home, they spent up to 17 hours a day at the hospital.

“We lived on McDonald's every night,” Craig said.

After the first month, they began taking shifts with Kathy getting weekdays and Craig getting nights and weekends.

Kathy usually left the house by 6:15 a.m. because she wanted to be at Sacred Heart by 7.

“Pulling into the parking lot every day, I pray that he has a positive outlook, so I don't have to pump him up,” she said.

Kathy and Craig hope that things will be better, easier now that Casey is home.

Casey will visit Sacred Heart four times a week, Monday through Thursday, for therapy. Friday, Saturday and Sunday he'll work at home, perhaps harder than at the hospital.

His parents urge him to work beyond what is required at Sacred Heart.

When his roughly seven hours of official therapy ended at 3:30 p.m. each day, his parents encouraged him to push the pedals on a stationary bike Craig had brought from home.

Doctors approved the bike, which is now back at the Royals' home. It is one of several pieces of equipment his mom and dad will use for his at-home therapy.

With hard work and professional guidance, the Royals said, their son should recover, his body should regenerate.

Casey has regained some of the 50 pounds he lost after the accident. At his lowest, he weighed 145. As of late December, his weight had climbed to about 160.

Equally important, his mind should sharpen. He showed no mental deficit while hospitalized. He continually beat his therapist at Uno, meant to trigger number and color recognition and encourage strategy. Casey also did spelling and math drills with his parents. He could begin home-schooling as early as next week. "We hope to have him graduate," Kathy said.

Casey's voice also should return. He already communicates with laminated cards his father made, pointing to words and phrases. And, Kathy said, "He's starting to talk to us. The other morning I said, 'Get up.' I heard him moan and he said, 'I'm tired.' And I said, 'What did you say?' That was so unexpected."

But for all his progress, Casey's parents fear their son is living with pain that even they cannot help heal.

The emotional toll of the accident, of losing his brother and his life as he knew it, is something Casey hasn't been able to share and that his parents have not yet begun to gauge.

"We don't know what to do. We don't want to bring it up and open a can of worms, but we don't want to not talk about it," Craig said.

For now, they mention it when the time seems right and don't when it doesn't.

Home to stay

Since mid-November, Casey Royal had been using hospital day passes.

For about eight hours on a Saturday or Sunday, he went home where he sat on the couch and saw his family. He also watched the clock tick the hours and minutes until he had to return to the hospital.

On Christmas Eve, Casey stopped watching the clock. For the first time since the accident, he could sleep at home.

It was short-lived reprieve, a test run for his actual homecoming about a week later, but it was enough for his little sister, Brittney, who slept on the floor by Casey's bed just to be near him.

A week later, Casey came home to stay.

Nearly 100 people came Dec. 30 to see Casey. The line snaked onto the lawn. People filled the garage, the hallway, the kitchen, the den. Some waited more than an hour just to give a hug and a quick hello. Casey seldom stopped smiling or giving the thumbs up, his two most effective means of communication since the accident.

“How you doing, Casey?” Thumbs up. “Are you surprised?” Smile. “We missed you, Case.” Thumbs up.

In a more ambitious moment, he tried an old secret handshake.

“This is amazing,” Kathy Royal said and patted his hand.

Tears were visible in Craig and Kathy's eyes.

As Craig marveled at the number of visitors, it reminded him of Cody's funeral.

“At Cody's wake there were over 1,200 people,” he said. “I don't even know 1,200 people. It's like we've been here all our lives.”

Blessed with friends

The Royals felt loved and knew they were blessed, but they didn't know how much until the accident.

They got their first inkling while at Froedtert.

“There had to be 400 people standing in the lobby,” Kathy said. “All day long it was packed. They were in the hallway. They were in the chapel. The best thing about it was the hospital didn't kick them out. It had to be at least three or four days with that many people.”

More than half the football team came after a night game. “A lot of times they didn't see him,” Kathy said. “They just came and prayed.”

Craig and Kathy had a spiral notebook for Casey's friends to fill with inside jokes and memories and wishes for the future. His parents read a couple of those notes to him each day.

Then there were the gifts.

For the family, there were fund-raisers put on by family, students, the Bristol Oaks Country Club and the Char Dogs, a local softball team.

For Cody Royal, there was “Cody's Corner,” the new name for the 16th hole at the Bristol Oaks golf course.

For Casey, there was the ball from the first game his team played without him. There were football awards. His red and white jersey, No. 3, framed by the Bradford booster group, the End

Zone Club. A baseball from his hitting coach. A visit from retired Milwaukee Brewer Larry Hise. And a package from the Chicago Bears, Casey's favorite professional football team. It included a signed football from Marty Booker and a bobblehead doll of his favorite player, Brian Uhrlacher.

“You want your kids to be involved with sports so they stay out of trouble,” Kathy said. “But it turns out you're uniting with a family.”

“The phone calls, the cards, the letters, the prayers. It just goes on and on and on,” she added. “You do feel guilty.”

“It's like when people say, ‘We don't know what to say.’ We don't know what to say back to you,” Craig said.

To say thank you, the Royals plan to do the only thing they feel they can: help Casey recover.

It's what Craig and Kathy decided after they found Casey's missing wallet.

There was a check inside, repayment for the baseball camp registration fee that another parent had put on a credit card. The Royals mailed it to the family.

“They sent it back to us in a card with a note that basically said, ‘The only way we'll take it back is when Casey delivers it,’” Craig said.

Tackling therapy

Learning to move again takes sweat, determination

BY JESSICA HANSEN

KENOSHA NEWS

For Casey Royal, working to overcome partial paralysis is like football practice.

On the field, every endeavor is exercise. In therapy, every regimen is recovery — even pressing the button for the elevator.

Most mornings during his hospitalization, Casey already had worked for three hours before the nurses wheeled him to physical therapy.

Between 7:30 and 8:30 a.m., he ate breakfast. Assisted daily living training followed. For 45 minutes, Casey, 18, learned to brush his teeth and wash his face, basic functions he could no longer do without effort. Speech therapy was next, then physical therapy.

He had few breaks between sessions.

On one late December morning, Casey rested on the two-minute trip to the elevator.

As the nurse wheeled him to the doors, he lifted a long, trembling arm.

The top arrow glowed when Casey touched it. He exhaled and let his arm fall into his lap.

In the therapy room, it took two nurses to lift him.

Debbie held him in a bear hug, her face buried in his chest. Tracy tucked her hip-length braid into her red turtleneck and grabbed him, too.

“I need this up,” Debbie said and tapped Casey’s chin.

With Debbie on the left and Tracy on the right, her left leg hooked around Casey’s right, they began their awkward three-legged progression.

Tracy looked down. “My itty-bitty foot compared to your massive one,” she said. She raised her head to avoid talking to his chest.

It had become their routine. Casey in the middle, while Debbie steered and Tracy worked the pedals.

Casey’s movements were tentative and prolonged, but controlled. He worked to push his left heel down with every step, but he did it.

Not so with his right leg, which had to be constantly manipulated.

When they finished, Casey was sweaty and exhausted. He sat wilted in his chair, eyes wide, White Sox T-shirt askew, tracheotomy scar exposed.

“Not one moan. Not one groan,” Debbie said.

“No pain?” Tracy asked Casey shook his head.

The session was over. Almost.

“Good job, Casey,” Tracy said. She extended her right hand. Casey offered his left.

Tracy pushed it away. “I want that other hand,” she said and reached for the weaker one.

Casey’s mother, Kathy Royal later teased her son that two-a-day football practices prepared him for this. His routine is hard and sweaty and never stops, just like long August days on the football field.

“It’s like a full-time job,” she said.