

Danbury's Benaiah McCullough Making Strong Recovery From Accident

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[In the June 2006 Beacon there was a long story by Alex Graf of the Inn at Danbury about Benaiah's accident and a fundraising dinner at the Inn to help him and his family. One year later, there's wonderful news to share.]

The bass drum thumped as Benaiah McCullough methodically tapped a foot pedal, and the cymbals crashed as his arms made their way around the drum set in his living room. His mother beamed as the 15-year-old played along – a bit off-tempo – with a music channel on TV. Not bad for a kid who needed a walker to get around just a few months ago.

The Danbury teen was hit by a car on March 27, 2006, as he rode his skateboard home from the post office. He suffered multiple skull fractures, a broken femur and torn ligaments around his two top vertebrae. He left the hospital one year ago today to begin a long, uncertain recovery at home. Three hundred and sixty-five days later, Benaiah's progression is obvious only to the doctors who treated him and the family members who helped rehabilitate him during the past year.

"People see him now and they don't realize the severity of where he's come from," his mother, Teresa McCullough, said, as Benaiah played a board game with his 12-year-old brother at the kitchen table.

Not only is Benaiah walking and talking, he has resumed skateboarding, bike-riding, and karate lessons. The hospital bed where he was confined for months was replaced by the drum set and an elliptical glider where the teen does his physical therapy. A wheelchair-accessible van parked beside the McCulloughs' home has a "For Sale" sign on the windshield.

As recently as December, however, Teresa McCullough said there "wasn't too much coming out of Benaiah."

Although he had been home for more than six months, his body struggled to heal the severe bruising on his brain. He had at least eight surgeries after the accident, which left him with a skin graft

to replace the lid over his right eye and a large scar near his collarbone where he suffered a puncture wound.

His family believes the puncture was from a windshield wiper of the small pickup truck that hit Benaiah along Route 104 in Danbury, just a few hundred feet from his house. According to the police, Benaiah hit the pickup's front passenger-side bumper and headlight, then slid up the hood, struck the corner of the windshield and took out the passenger-side mirror. He was airlifted to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, where he remained for 49 days.

"He wasn't supposed to make it, that's how bad he was," McCullough said.

A tube, or shunt, was permanently inserted under his skin but outside his skull to drain the fluid that builds up around his brain. He received his medicine through a feeding tube, and his family took turns staying up with him 24 hours a day. Recurring shunt infections and seizures forced him to undergo more procedures and brief stints at Dartmouth-Hitchcock in the months after he returned home. But an adjustment to the shunt by one of his doctors in December – allowing less pressure to build up inside his brain – has prompted a dramatic improvement, his mother said.

"The way I describe it is, he woke up," she said.

The visiting nurses and therapists who first came to the McCullough house last year were lucky if they could get five to 10 minutes of work with Benaiah before he fell asleep. Now, his physical and occupational therapy sessions have been cut from three times a week to two, and he only sees a speech therapist once a week. By September, they won't be coming at all.

Benaiah lost 30 pounds after the accident, but he has gained it back and then some, Teresa McCullough said. He works his legs and arms every day on the elliptical glider and has also moved on to recreational activities. He rode his bike for the first time at the end of March, went rock climbing with his family last month, and has weekly visits from his karate instructor. He took his first trip to a skate park in Rye and used the new

skateboard he received for his birthday last year – a gift from the 18-year-old who was driving the pickup that hit him.

Last week, he cooked pasta for lunch, showed off his drawings of Calvin and Hobbes, and talked about the accident, which he doesn't remember. His mother, who teaches Benaiah and 12-year-old Jared at home, is working on bringing him back up to speed with his school work. He was halfway through his freshmen year in high school when the accident happened.

Although his long-term memory is intact, notes posted around the house help Benaiah with short-term memory loss. He records his appointments, including karate lessons, family plans, and therapy sessions in an agenda book that also helps him remember what day it is.

"Mom, I'm sorry to ask you this, but what did you want me to get?" he asked his mother, just a few moments after he left to retrieve his favorite stuffed animal from his bedroom one day last week.

"Think, buddy," she said, coaxing the answer from him.

Benaiah gets bored easily and is always excited, sometimes acting like a toddler, his mother said. A sign in his bedroom reminds him that he must wait until 5 AM to turn on his television – one morning he was up by 2:30 AM – and he knows he is not allowed downstairs until either his father, Kevin, or brothers, Jared and 22-year-old Jonathon, are with him.

Because Benaiah sustained so much damage to his brain's frontal lobe, his decision-making has been affected. Last week, his mother said, the dogs got loose and he chased them across the busy road. On another occasion, he stepped out in front of traffic in the grocery store parking lot. When he sent a ball flying through the living room with a swift kick, McCullough remained calm.

"Was that a good decision?" she asked Benaiah. He answered no, apologized, and told his mother he loved her.

"He's very impulsive; that's what we have to work on," she later said.

What hasn't been affected much is his happy-go-lucky personality, de-

spite concerns that his injury would be followed by anger, which is common with brain injury victims, Teresa McCullough said. Benaiah has been nothing but cooperative, happy, and helpful. He has started volunteering in Grafton with senior citizens once a week, something he did before the accident, and has visited several of the churches that helped raise money for him during his hospital stay. The entire family has a deep Christian faith that has only strengthened during Benaiah's recovery, McCullough said.

"We've learned that we need to cherish every moment," she said. "If you have kids, they're only with you for a short time, even shorter than you realize."

The family went up to Dartmouth-Hitchcock on the one-year anniversary of Benaiah's accident to pass out goody bags to all the nurses and doctors in the pediatric intensive care unit and the regular pediatric floor where he spent more than a month last year. A few days later, they threw a party at their house to celebrate another year of life. He hasn't been for a check-up with his doctors since December, and McCullough said she can't wait for the rehabilitation specialists to see her son at the end of the month.

On June 20, Benaiah will turn 16 years old. "God's given me every day, and I'm so thankful," he said.

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