

PERSEVERANCE IS BLISS

A STUDENT LEFT PARALYZED BY A BRUTAL BEATING
IS DETERMINED TO WALK AGAIN

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Mike Bliss doesn't think his story will ever make it to the big screen. "No one's ever going to make a movie about us," he says to his mom, Cheryl, dismissing any notion that he might be worthy of Hollywood's attention. "There's no way."

It's one of the few times that you'll hear the 21-year-old Greece resident talk negatively. Words like "can't," "won't" and "don't" are not part of Bliss' vocabulary. Most of the time (about 90 percent his mom says), Bliss is upbeat and determined, steadily focused on the one goal that gets him up at 8 a.m. (sometimes earlier) every morning — "My long-term goal is one thing," he says sternly. "To walk."

ROCKIN' WITH MIKE

WHAT: A benefit to support the therapy efforts of Mike Bliss.

WHERE: Water Street Music Hall, 204 N. Water St.

WITH: The Dean's List, Waxmen, Full Throttle and others

WHEN: 2 to 9 p.m. Sunday, June 29

COST: \$10 (\$15 at the door)

TICKETS: Call 232-1900, or go to www.ticketmaster.com

DETAILS: For more on Bliss' story, go to: mikebliss.weebly.com

Mike Bliss played hockey in at Greece Arcadia. Although his favorite pro team is the Buffalo Sabres, he owns an autographed Wayne Gretzky jersey.



It's been three long months since the incident that has left Bliss a shell of his former self. He is paralyzed from the waist down. Above the waist he has such limited mobility in his hands that he's unable to perform basic, everyday tasks such as getting dressed by himself or typing more than "one letter per minute" on his computer.

According to initial Buffalo police reports, around 3:30 a.m. on Saturday, March 22, Bliss, a junior at the State University of New York at Buffalo, was attacked near the school by three men in their early 20s — two UB students and an alumnus.

There was evidence that Bliss was "punched, kicked and knocked to the ground," said Michael DeGeorge, spokesman for the Buffalo Police Department, via e-mail to the press following the incident.

Bliss was beaten so severely that he suffered a suppressed (pushed-down) spine and two fractured vertebrae. He was taken to Erie County Medical Center where, within hours, he had surgery to fuse the two bones back together.

In the days that followed, Bliss was hooked up to a respirator and had little or no sensation and movement from the neck down. He was unable to even drink water on his own and says he "almost lost it" a few times, referring to brief moments when he actually flat-lined, though his heart quickly started beating again on its own.

"Just let him live," Cheryl Bliss, recalls thinking when she first arrived at the hospital. "I didn't even think about the injury itself, I just wanted him to live and I figured we would deal with whatever came later."

Mike Bliss has a hard time remembering that time. He still struggles to piece together events, relying on family members' memories of him praying with nurses and asking his parents for some of his favorite foods — pizza and oatmeal cream pies.

In the months following the attack, two of the suspects have been indicted on charges of attempted murder and assault (and are due back in court in July), while the third was not indicted after testifying in front of a Buffalo grand jury. Bliss and his family won't talk about specific events surrounding the incident, because they don't want to interfere with the court proceedings. While Bliss admits he's angry and frustrated, he chooses not to dwell on what's happened. Instead, he focuses on the struggle ahead, motivated by the overwhelming support he has received.

A Web site set up for him by family and friends (mikebliss.weebly.com) has received more than 33,000 hits and more than 600 comments from people offering support. There have already been benefits for him at Holy Cross Church in Charlotte and Spenders bar on Lyell Avenue. There will also be a benefit concert on Sunday, June 29, at Water Street Music Hall (see info box), where items auctioned off include a donated Buffalo Sabres jersey autographed by the hockey team, his favorite.

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PEOPLE

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FIGHTING BACK

"I look in the mirror now and I see a scrawny little kid," says Bliss, on the walkway in front of his home on a sunny day in mid-June. Since his injury, Bliss estimates that he's lost roughly 15 pounds. But looking at pictures of him from before, 15 pounds seems on the low side.

For most of his late teenage and young-adult years, Bliss could be described as athletic. While a student at Greece Arcadia High School, he was into weightlifting and was a standout on the Greece Lightning hockey team.

"I never ever thought Michael would have been somebody who could handle this type of injury, just because he is very into sports and moving around," says his mother.

After his surgery, Bliss was restricted to basic bedside physical therapy in the Intensive Care Unit, working to get basic motor skills back in his hands. He spent two weeks at Erie County Medical Center before being transferred to Strong Memorial Hospital to begin more intensive rehabilitation. It was at Strong that it became clear to his mom how tough the road ahead would be.

"He just kind of plopped over," Cheryl Bliss says about seeing her son at his first few rehab session at Strong. "His whole body was just a marshmallow."

Still, it wasn't too long before Bliss was making progress. He spent five weeks at Strong rebuilding his upper body and was able to move back home with his mom and his dad, Michael Sr., on May 14.

The younger Bliss says he now has almost full sensation throughout his entire body. He feels stronger. He's able to shake hands with visitors and hold a glass of water with one hand. He can feed himself using a special adaptive device for utensils. He even jokes about his tennis skills on the Nintendo Wii, which he plays by using a wrap to keep the controller in his hand.

"I'm not Roger Federer yet, but I'm getting there," he says.

Playing the Wii is one of the few moments of Bliss' everyday life that isn't devoted to therapy.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays he goes to Clinton Crossing Medical Complex in Brighton where he does occupational therapy for one hour and physical therapy for another. He then returns home to do push-ups on his exercise mat.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he typically heads out to Pieter's Family Life Center in Batavia to use a Functional Electronic Stimulization bike, a cycle that gives small electrical jolts to riders' leg muscles, stimulating them to push the pedals in hopes of building muscle mass and firing up nerve cells.

On Saturdays, or sometimes another day during the week, Bliss goes to Pieters for aquatic therapy or to use the facility's adaptive weight equipment.

"It's grueling and it's a lot of frustration," Bliss says of therapy.



Though unable to stand on his own, Bliss maintains a grueling physical-therapy regimen which includes lots of push-ups.

His long-term goal may be to walk, but at this point, Bliss still can't stand on his own. The Bliss family recently purchased a standing table, a device that supports and holds a person's body upright. A standing table can be useful in generating better circulation, maintaining bone integrity, limiting spasms and improving kidney and bladder function. For Bliss, using the standing table is one of the most tiring aspects of therapy.

"Pure exhaustion keeps me from standing as long as I'd like," he says. Just being upright can lead to dizzy spells and autonomic dysreflexia (over-activity of the autonomic nervous system, which causes excessively high blood pressure).

SURROUNDED BY SUPPORT

At therapy or at home, Bliss is rarely alone. The driveway at his house is always filled with cars. There are grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends all there to help Bliss work out, stretch and get to, and from, his bed.

Bliss' room has been moved downstairs and occupies what once was the dining room. Decorating the walls are objects that showcase the support Bliss has received in the past few months. Posterboards from the recent benefit at Holy Cross church — signed by so many of his friends you can

no longer see the white of the cardboard; an autographed Sabres jersey; an autographed football from former Buffalo Bills player Kevin Everett, who fractured and dislocated his spine in a game last fall. Everett is now walking, although initially, doctors told him there was a good chance he wouldn't.

Bliss met Everett on June 2, after the former tight end invited Bliss and his family to appear with him on *AM Buffalo*, a talk show on WKBW-TV (Channel 7). In addition, Everett has invited the Bliss family to the kickoff party for his summer golf tournament on July 6.

"He's incredible," Bliss says of Everett. "He just told me to pray and believe in

God's healing powers, to have a lot of family around and be optimistic."

Along with Everett, Bliss has had the opportunity to meet and talk with many inspiring figures. Among them: Kendall, Orleans County, native and former Ultimate Fighting Championship title-contender Frank Trigg; Rochester native and NHL star Brian Gionta; Buffalo mayor Byron Brown; and Pat Rummerfield, director of development for the International Center for Spinal Cord Injury at Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, where Bliss hopes to go in the near future.

Despite all he's been through, Bliss is, in many ways, still a typical 21-year-old. His hopes for the future aren't different from those of many of his peers.

"Married and maybe a kid or two," he says as he smiles, thinking about life five years from now. "And with a college degree, maybe I'll have a job lined up somewhere."

Although, since his injury, Bliss' career plans have changed. He was an accounting major at UB, but now finds himself intrigued by the thing he's working so hard to

repair.

"The anatomy of the spinal chord interests me," he says, talking about possible plans to pursue a career in medicine.

Bliss' favorite song has also changed, from the catchy "Me and My Gang" by Rascal Flatts, his favorite band, to the country group's song "Stand," whose lyrics ("Cause when push comes to shove/You taste what you're made of... You get mad you get strong/Wipe your hands shake it off/Then you stand) perfectly match the latest chapter in Bliss' life.

"I've heard I've got a 10 to 20 percent chance (to walk again)," he says. "But I'm still hopeful. Looking back, I've definitely come a long way, and to tell you the truth, I'd rather have it be a low percentage, because when I do walk, it's gonna be a better feeling. It motivates me to get up and work."

To hear Bliss talk with unwavering conviction about walking again, you'd think it is a certainty. And to him, it is. The courage that has brought him to this point is perhaps far too complex for any Hollywood screenplay. It's the stuff real dreams are made of. ♦



Bliss has received support from friends, family and even former Buffalo Bills' player Kevin Everett.

IN PAIN?



FREE SEMINAR

Presentation and Q & A by: Mike Roman
Chronic Pain Survivor, Amputee and
Formula Mazda Race Car Driver

Wednesday, July 9

6:30 PM to 7:30 PM

Refreshments will be provided

Rochester Doubletree Hotel
1111 Jefferson Rd, Rochester, NY 14623

RSVP to Pete Dombroski
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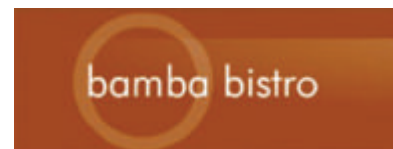
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