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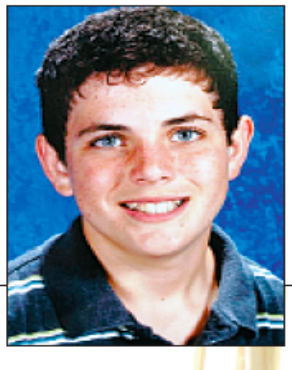
Family hopeful for recovery of comatose teen



Hayden Stanley, before an accident put him in a coma.

FAMILY PHOTO

"This kid's a fighter. We've had so many miracles."
– **Laurie Stanley** on her oldest son, Hayden

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Paxton Stanley, 10, comforts her brother, Hayden, at their home in Springfield. He has been in a coma since March.

Hayden Stanley has been in coma since being hit by a car on March 31.

By Dirk VanderHart
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Sometimes they talk about him in the present tense, like he's the same Hayden.

Even as the heart monitor beeps quietly near his bed — a small gray sentinel over a son who hasn't spoken in months — Laurie and John Stanley talk about his plans, his demeanor.

"Hayden's one of those kids you don't ever have to worry about," his mother said. "He's a good Christian boy, does it all right. He has college plans already."

But words can't change reality. Hayden will never be able to make good on those plans.

Doctors give the 15-year-old Springfield boy a 5 percent chance of pulling out of the coma he's been in since March 31, when a teen from down the road accidentally ran him down in front of his Roxbury Street home.

If he does wake up, the extensive brain damage he suffered that day will render him severely disabled.

"It is what it is," his parents often say.

But the months since the accident have been the worst of the Stanleys' lives.

Each day is a struggle to fight the bitterness and sadness that accompany the unnecessary loss of a healthy, happy son. Each month, there are questions about how to pay for Hayden's medical care, fears he'll get sick.

John Stanley hasn't been able to work since his son was injured. His wife still can't go into the basement where Hayden's room sits, untouched.

But there is hope, too.

Their son, the parents are quick to point out, has continually exceeded medical expectations. From surviving that first, brutal night to breathing on his own, Hayden has proven tenacious.

Both parents are confident that, with time and patience, their firstborn son will awaken.

"This kid's a fighter," Laurie Stanley said recently, giving her son's curly hair a gentle tousle. "We've had so many miracles."

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John Stanley gives his son, Hayden, a kiss on the forehead at their home.

THE ACCIDENT

March 31 was a sunny day.

So much so that 16-year-old Terrence Ondatje told officers he didn't see the neighbor boy until it was too late to swerve or stop short.

The sun was in his eyes, he said. He

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Hope/Family recalls miracles

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couldn't see the road.

So, when the car finally came to a halt, Hayden — who seconds before was helping a friend fix a motorbike at the side of the road — had been dragged for several feet. He was trapped underneath.

John Stanley, meanwhile, had just gone in to check on some steaks. Not five minutes earlier, the man had been in the driveway playing basketball with his son.

But then there was frantic pounding on the door and his younger son's voice screaming, "Hayden got hit!"

Then the sight of his eldest son's right arm and head emerging from under a green car.

Then John Stanley was running.

"I've seen people die, and he was there," said Stanley, who as a U.S. Army soldier served in Operation Desert Storm and, to a smaller degree, Operation Iraqi Freedom. "He had blood coming out of every hole in his face."

Miracles

The accident scene was confusion.

Ondatje had left the vehicle by the time people began to gather, and bystanders had to help lift the car off Hayden.

Six people and their aggregate adrenaline finally accomplished that task.

"I don't think I've ever tried to lift anything so heavy," John Stanley said. "I just couldn't get it off him."

And then, as Laurie Stanley likes to say, miracles began to occur.

A young neighborhood woman to whom Hayden used to blow audacious kisses was on the scene. She didn't have any medical training, but had the presence of mind to turn the unconscious teen's face out of the blood he'd begun to inhale. She stuck her fingers in the boy's mouth to keep him from swallowing his tongue.

Also present, the Stanleys said, was a neighbor with years of paramedic experience. He rode to the hospital with the other EMTs (who, by the way, were off duty and just happened to be nearby when the call came in).

Doctors at the intensive care unit told the Stanleys their son had a 1 percent chance of making it through the night.

He lived.

Three weeks later, as he was being weaned off life support, the parents were told Hayden would likely suffer heart failure.

The organ beat on.

It was immensely heartening to the Stanleys, seeing Hayden fight so hard. It seemed there was no limit to how he might improve.

The bottom dropped out, though, in June, when doctors at St. Louis Children's Hospital told them of the results of an MRI test.

Hayden's brain damage was much more extensive than they originally thought. He had, the doctors said, only about a 5 percent chance of coming out of the coma.

Laurie and John Stanley get their son, Hayden, 15, out of the wheelchair into his bed. Hayden's bed sits in the family's living room, and he is never alone.

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It became hard to hope.

"That was my lowest point," John Stanley said. "It was like getting hit in the face with a brick."

The driver

To this day, the Stanleys haven't met Ondatje, the teen who ran down their son.

They say there was no apology or inquiry as to Hayden's condition from him after the accident.

John Stanley says he once saw Ondatje, now 17, staring at the wooden wheelchair ramp the Stanleys have had to build in front of the house, but the teen looked away when he saw Stanley.

In the days after the accident, John Stanley was vengeful toward his neighbor, but that feeling has since subsided.

The only communication between the Stanleys and the teen is in court papers.

Earlier this month, the parents filed suit against Terrence Ondatje and his mother, Lydia, seeking damages for negligent driving.

Though she's never said it to them, Lydia Ondatje expressed sympathy for the Stanleys when asked about the situation recently.

"Our heart goes out to them," she said. "I know it's hard for them to face each day.

"It's a terrible thing."

No charges have been filed against Terrence Ondatje for the Stanley accident. However, misdemeanor charges filed last week allege he was at fault in a September accident in which he failed to yield to another vehicle.

The center of their lives

These days, their injured son is quite literally the centerpiece of the Stanleys' lives.

His bed sits squarely in the center of the living room, surrounded by specialty equipment and cabinets full of day-to-day necessities.

"I think it's important," said Laurie Stanley. "I think it's good to have him in the middle of everyday life."

To that end, the family does everything around Hayden, who would've begun high school this year.

Where once the five Stanleys — John, Laurie, Hayden and siblings Denton, 12, and Paxton, 10 — would gather in the parents' queen-size bed on evenings to watch TV, they now gather around Hayden's bed.

The comatose teen, in fact, is never alone.

John and Laurie Stanley have opted not to hire a 24-hour nurse, preferring to take care of their son themselves.

Each night, they trade off four-hour shifts in the living room, making sure Hayden's heart rate remains constant and his breathing is steady.

The couple never goes out to eat or to the movies.

"Why would I leave him?" Laurie Stanley said. "I don't know how to do it different."

They take their cues from his body language.

Hayden might shake his foot to communicate something to them, his parents say, or raise his head.

The Stanleys talk to him as they normally might, and watch football with him on the weekends like they always have.

In those ways, life is as regular as it can be.

Still, the mood around the home is more sullen these days.

The family is, after all, forced to treat as an infant a son who once dreamed of being a college football star and teaching history.

"How do you be happy when he's in this state?" John Stanley said. "I still feel guilty when I laugh."

Needing help

The parents, of course, can't do it all by themselves.

Each week, Hayden undergoes three separate therapies, and a nurse comes in on certain days.

To properly care for the teen, the Stanleys have had to obtain all manner of expensive equipment, and still don't have everything they need.

"Things you would not normally think about become very expensive," John Stanley said.

Next up on their list of purchases: a van modified to transport their disabled son, the price tag of which is well above $40,000.

The only problem is the couple's bank account, which as of Saturday, they said, contained $2.

Hayden is not insured, and John Stanley doesn't know when he'll be able to resume his job at a security systems company.

Some of the costs for Hayden's care are covered by Medicaid, but "quite a bit" isn't, Laurie Stanley said.

"We've had to take a lot of family loans and beg a lot," she said.

Their church has taken offerings for the Stanleys, and Hayden's friends have organized fundraisers.

There are three separate T-shirts in circulation that show support for Hayden, as well as buttons and bracelets.

"Our community and our church have been great," Laurie Stanley said.

Refusing to give up

The worst thing they can do is dwell on the negative things — what their son is missing out on or will never experience.

The Stanleys do everything they can to avoid these thoughts, to focus on the task at hand and celebrate Hayden's small progresses.

Sometimes, though, the negative creeps in. Then, the Stanleys don't talk about their son in the present tense.

"Hayden never got to get his own (driver's) permit, have girlfriends, go to college," Laurie Stanley said. "We can't think about that."

Occasionally, her thoughts drift to the prayers she kept repeating the day Hayden was hit, when she begged God to let her son live.

"What if this was it and God answered my prayers and this is all it is?" she said.

Mostly, though, their outlook is sunnier.

Hayden might react to someone talking about him or a touchdown by a favorite football team, and it's a victory for his parents.

They see remnants of their son shine through his condition.

They hope.

"Every hurdle they've put in front of him he's cleared," John Stanley said. "We look at the big picture and we know it's going to be all right.

"One day he'll open his eyes."

Want to help?

Those interested in making a financial gift to help the Stanleys should call Empire Bank.

The family has set up an account for the teen called the Benefit Fund for Hayden Stanley.

The bank's main number is 881-3100.