On the Receiving End

A serious car accident puts paramedic in unfamiliar role of patient

By Denise Porter

For most of Josh Blackburn's life, he has been able to stay calm in high-stress situations, think critically and keep his emotions in check.

“It comes naturally and easily,” he says. “I can rationalize well. During what most people would consider to be medical emergencies, I don’t stress or overreact.”

As a full-time paramedic and part-time nurse with Tillamook Regional Medical Center, Josh puts his skills to good use on the helping end of medical emergencies.

After eight years of assisting others in their time of need, Josh found himself on the receiving end of his job on January 4. He had just gone off duty and was driving home along U.S. 101 near Garibaldi when his car slid on black ice.

“I’ve talked with multiple people who said they’d slipped in that same area,” he says. “I am a seasoned driver on ice.”

From what he can piece together, Josh’s car spun, slipped sideways and was hit by a full-size truck. He is grateful the occupants in the truck were not harmed. Josh was knocked unconscious and suffered damage at the cellular level throughout his brain, with a bleed on the right side.

Paramedics in small towns sometimes are called to an emergency involving a person they know.

“I believe it’s helpful, because it helps the patient know there is someone you know that truly cares,” says Josh. “When people recognize you and know you, it helps ease their stress.”

But now Josh’s coworkers were responding to a crash scene involving one of their own working team. Thinking back, Josh says, “It shook up the people that responded—and not just my co-workers, but the police and fire department, too.”

They may have been shook up, but the responders on the scene knew their job and did it.

“They saved me; their quickness in response,” says Josh. “I know it.”

Josh’s wife, Amy, remembers that morning clearly. Their children, Abby, 6, and Westin, 4, were waiting for Josh to arrive home from work so they could hug him goodbye before having a day of fun with family members. Josh was late. Amy tried to call him and was unsuccessful.

The phone rang, and Amy received news from hospital staff that Josh had been in an accident. She
hugged their children and sent them out the door with her brother, as planned. When she arrived at the local hospital, she says it was the utmost comfort to see Josh's co-workers there readying him for the Life Flight to Portland.

“I couldn’t have felt better about that,” Amy says. “When I came into the ER, the two paramedics who responded on the scene had known him for a long time. They asked how I was doing. I asked them how they were. Seeing the outpouring from the people I don’t even know, it was truly humbling.”

Josh remembers nothing of the accident, or the 10 days he spent at Legacy Emmanuel Hospital in Portland. His first coherent memories are of waking up in an inpatient rehabilitation center in Portland.

Waiting was hardest on Amy and Josh’s family and friends. The doctors told Amy that Josh had damage throughout his brain. When Josh did come to, “Would he be a vegetable?” Amy asks. “We didn’t know.”

Josh slowly regained consciousness, reaching for his wife and family, but had paralysis in one leg. He underwent surgery on his spine to correct it.

Those days were difficult, Amy recalls, but the support of their family, friends, Josh’s co-workers and the entire community were a source of constant strength.

“So many people genuinely cared about how he was doing,” she remembers. “I don’t think you ever know in normal life what people truly think about you. I can’t even tell you how humbling it was.”

The community rallied behind Josh’s recovery. Calls, texts and Facebook messages poured in. Josh was on numerous prayer chains across the country.

“I think people praying had a huge impact,” says Josh.

His co-workers set up a U-Caring website for monetary donations. When they asked if they could, “I said ‘yes,’ because I know what it’s like to want to do something for a family that needs help,” Amy says.

“The people he works with visited the most frequently,” says Amy. “His work partner was there for hours and hours. It really just showed how dedicated Josh is to his job and community and his relationships with people. It wasn’t something I was fully tuned into.”

Recovery has been slow by Josh’s standards, but remarkable in Amy’s eyes. Physically, Josh had to relearn to walk. Cognitively, he lost much, such as some of his sense of taste and smell.

“His senses are dulled,” Amy says.

“Most of the memory loss for me is what I describe as superficial memory—things that weren’t important,” Josh says. “I’m slower. It takes a little longer mentally.”

His body aches and his movements are slower too, but he says you have to really know him to see it.

Josh was medically cleared to return to work and is slowly making progress planting the garden on his small farm, regaining energy and stamina daily. He estimates that he lost 15 pounds of muscle mass from inactivity during recovery.

Josh has thoughts about what the outcome could have been.

“I’m not afraid of dying, that’s not it,” he says. “But I’m happy because I could be sitting here incapacitated and a challenge for my family. Instead I am still able to take care of family, which is a priority for me, and I attribute that to God.”

Thinking over the past five months, Amy doesn’t “ever want to do that kind of experience again soon, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything, either,” she says.

Mostly, she is grateful to everyone who helped, in big and small ways.

“I don’t think thank you is quite enough,” she says. “I don’t know how to find words bigger than ‘thank you’ for the genuine love and care we received. It’s not something we can repay for what it did for us. How can you find words big enough for that?”