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Remembrances of Stephanie's Brain Injury

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This is hard to write because it is hard to replay the intense feelings surrounding those first few days. My friend Sherrill and I were interviewing at Aki Kurose for a job Stephanie had recommended us for; that's where I was when the principal asked if we had heard about Steph. We had not, so she filled us in on the little she knew. Fear rose in me when I heard the words, "...may not make it." I was too stunned for any questions. We went home, and I began making phone calls to determine where Stephanie was and what her condition was.

I don't remember when I decided to go to the hospital; I just knew that I had to go. I got lost driving, but eventually found the hospital and Stephanie's floor. A nurse told me how to find her room, so I began walking in the indicated direction. I wasn't looking at room numbers, just at the patients in the rooms. I passed a room where an older, bald man lay covered to the neck, apparently sleeping. It was hard to look at him because he was very swollen. I couldn't find Stephanie's room, so I returned to the desk to ask for help. The nurse asked who I was, and then walked me to the correct room. Immediately I felt sick. The bald man with the badly swollen face and the awful incisions was Stephanie, my principal, someone I admired, respected, and liked beyond words. The nurse retreated, and I stood by Stephanie's bed talking quietly to her for several minutes. I was afraid to touch her. I was afraid she was going to die. I was afraid I hadn't told her how important she was to me. I was just afraid.

A woman came into the room and stopped short when she saw me. I didn't have any idea who she was, but it was clear by the look on her face that Stephanie was important to her and I wasn't. I quickly held out my hand, smiled, and told her who I was. She asked how I had gotten into Steph's room, and she seemed quite upset when I told her that I had been shown the way by a nurse. The visitor turned out to be Paula, the person clearly in charge of protecting Stephanie. We left the room and returned to the visitors' area where Paula explained Stephanie's condition and what was being done to save her. She was in an induced coma though I don't remember why. Paula told me about the fall at home, about the seizure and about what had happened in the emergency room. It was a lot to take in all at once. Other friends arrived, Susan and another person. They did not seem as worried probably because they had known about things from the start. I stayed until I felt better. Funny thing to say, isn't it?

From that day on, Barb Greenlee and I did whatever we could to help Stephanie by helping Paula and Susan. We provided some meals, did a little gardening, and visited Stephanie whenever Paula said it was okay. A few times one or the other of us stayed with Stephanie while Paula ran errands; Paula did not want Stephanie left alone in her room.

I have many recollections of those weeks in the hospital. At first, I was amazed that Steph could actually speak and move around. However, it didn't take long to see that whatever she was saying wasn't making any sense to anyone else in the room. She talked about work and people I did not know. It was altogether sad and funny listening to Steph's "original" words and expressions as she tried to make herself understood. She asked many questions of me and of Barb, but she had no ability to process our responses. Her manners were evident when someone came into her room. She would welcome everyone with something like, "Hello. It's so good to see you." But the empty look in her eyes told the true story—she had no idea who the person

was. Nurses and cleaning staff got the same greeting as friends and family. I found that empty look to be both innocent and terrifying. Over and over, I wondered if Stephanie would ever be once again the Stephanie who had turned Madison into a school to be proud of.

During hallway walks and various ministrations from Paula and hospital staff Stephanie endured, unknowingly, things that would have embarrassed her had she been her “real” self. She seemed unaware of how she looked or sounded, and I was glad that she really didn’t understand the ramifications of her injuries.

I remember seeing the hole in the wall caused when Steph escaped her bindings and wandered the hall late one night. I worried about her safety and the quality of her care. Steph asked me many times to remove her bindings and to help her “get out of this place.” She was so good at negotiating everything. If I would let her out for just a few minutes, she would be good for a long time.

I remember how hard Stephanie tried to establish some control over her life by refusing to comply with certain requests. Sometimes she would refuse to wear her helmet, and sometimes she wore it backwards. During sessions with the speech therapist Stephanie made serious attempts to fool him when she did not recognize pictures of herself, others, cats, etc. She would look rather disgusted and say, “Well, everybody knows what THAT is!” or “Of course I know who that is, so why should I have to tell you?”

I remember how important the schedule on the wall was to Stephanie. She obsessed about the time and where she was to go next even though she didn’t seem to understand time. I remember feeling very sad when I saw Paula’s name printed on Stephanie’s wrist band; she simply could not recall Paula’s name.

I have memories of walking the halls with Stephanie, waiting with Paula for the shunt to be implanted, and seeing the skull depression when Stephanie’s cap was removed.

I guess that’s all except for one thing. The communication made available through the Caring Bridge was truly a lifeline to Stephanie’s progress. Paula will probably never know the importance of the entries she wrote. I can’t speak for anyone else, but I know how I felt every time I found a new entry. I rejoiced at the good news and suffered with the bad. But through it all was a slow progress that gave me hope for Stephanie’s recovery. Living through this experience with Stephanie in the small way that I did change me. I live more in the moment, and I express my feelings to people I care for more easily.