

Five years later, miracles still happening for Mary

written by Dwain Hebda |



Five years is a long time in the life of a family.

In five years, helpless infants turn into running, chattering wee people. In five years, wedding anniversary tokens shift from fragile paper to sturdy wood. Promotions and degrees are conferred, warranties expire, teens grow through as many sizes, the family dog turns 35 in people years.

For the Drakes of Christ the King Church in Little Rock, five years has been at once a lifetime and a drop in the bucket.

“His way, his time,” Mary Drake recently typed.

Five years since that awful day; the one with the sickening phone call every parent forces themselves not to imagine, yet hears and sees plain as day as they watch their teenager pull out of the driveway. It was a momentary distraction, a youthful lapse of concentration, barely enough time to say “I love you,” but long enough to alter the course of decades to come.

“God has found that I have come this far,” Mary typed again. “Can do good for him.”

Mary Drake, 21, might be the most loved person in Little Rock. Word of her automobile accident that November 2009 day barely reached the halls of Mount St. Mary Academy before people started banding together to support her family, raise money for medical treatment, pray, cry, wait. Those who knew the family intimately and people who had never met her or her parents, Jim and Patti Drake, looked at their own children and held their breath.

Miracles for Mary fundraising events drew thousands. Families from Catholic High School from which Mary's brothers Paul and Michael graduated, Catholic parishes near and far, co-workers, clergy, everyone from everywhere in the state it seemed also stepped forward.

Mount girls launched Facebook pages for Mary and houndstooth skirts invaded the hallways and waiting rooms of Arkansas Children's Hospital and Baptist Rehab Hospital in Little Rock. In eight months, Mary never spent a single night alone; 18 months later, her classmates awarded her an honorary diploma.

"It is hard to describe what that felt like, it was so overwhelming" Jim said of the outpouring the family received. "So many people were so full of love for us. I don't think we fully realized it until we were put in a position like this."

Now, five years have passed drop by drop. Those same classmates are out of college with first jobs and stress over relationships or student loans. In a manner of thinking, she's been left behind — just not to Mary's way of thinking.

"I won't say she's OK with the way she is, but she's accepted it," Patti said. "She knows what her place is and she's determined to live things out the way God's intended for her. She's happy, she's joyful, she laughs, she makes hilarious faces."

Having walked a parent's darkest nightmare Patti and Jim today stand for others facing their own journey back from traumatic brain injury. Their foundation, Miracles for Mary, seeks to perpetuate the help and love they received through service to people struggling with funding home renovations, such as building a wheelchair ramp or reconfiguring bedrooms or bathrooms for a recovering loved one.

"We've helped a couple of people with money for renovation projects," Jim said. "We've helped a family as far away as Dallas transition back into their home. We plan to do other things as grants and opportunities become available."

Annually, the Drakes are reminded of the deep love that exists for them within their parish and diocese. The golf tournament that helps fund the foundation will be Aug. 22-23 at Country Club of Arkansas in Maumelle.

The Drakes don't stop at financial help, important though that is. Every family is dealt a brain injury differently and for some, emotional and spiritual support are every bit as valuable as money when facing the long journey back to whatever normalcy will look like from now on.

"A brain injury is like a snowflake, there are no two exactly the same," Patti said. "So, when we talk to a family facing this, we can only say, 'This is what it was like for us,' because their situation will be totally different."

The one constant on this journey has been the indomitable spirit of Mary herself. While she is still confined to a wheelchair, she has made impressive strides, including gaining a lot of trunk

control and balance. She can't yet walk, but she takes part in weekly equine-assisted therapy sessions. She can't yet speak, but she's learned to communicate through her iPad.

On May 13 she celebrated graduation day, receiving her full high school diploma through a Little Rock School District program for homebound students. She has her good days and bad days like everyone else, but she attacks them like few others.

"Mary had a huge impact on our lives before the accident and now she continues to give us strength," Patti said. "She just doesn't give up."