

Still recovering, maimed woman goes on with life

Rutland Herald (VT)-September 8, 2008

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THETFORD - Carmen Tarleton cannot see. For now, her eyes are sewn shut. She can hear, but only out of one ear. She can speak, but her diction suffers because of her disfigured mouth. She can stand, but she uses a cane just in case.

Fifteen months after a lye attack nearly killed her, the 40-year-old nurse and mother of two considers herself lucky to be alive. Those who know her best consider her a kind of miracle - in body and mind.

"She's not only survived, but she's survived with this intact soul," said sister Kesstan Blandin. "Her person is intact. It's been wounded, but it's intact."

On June 10, 2007, estranged husband Herbert Rodgers allegedly broke into their house, tied her up and dumped industrial-strength lye on her. She was left with a broken arm, a broken eye socket and burns over 80 percent of her body.

"I lost it, I just lost it," he said as he was arrested, according to police.

Charged with first-degree aggravated domestic assault, Rodgers, 53, remains jailed without bail as he awaits trial.

Tarleton, meanwhile, is coming to terms with life in a body scarred by burns and skin grafts.

"What happened to me is just like not real," she said. "It's more like something you see on TV, or a gross movie, you know? What happened to me just is so bad, that I have dealt with it pretty well."

She has had 41 surgeries - most of them skin grafts - including a July 15 synthetic cornea transplant that she hopes will eventually restore sight in her left eye.

"They said they'll leave my eye closed, the way it is, for a couple of months. I'm hoping in September, they'll open it up, and then I'll be able to see whatever I'll be able to see," she said.

She remembers feeling warm after the lye hit her skin, and then her teenage daughters pouring cold water on her as they awaited an ambulance.

From there, it was months of treatment, sedation and surgery, first in a Boston hospital, then a rehabilitation center.

She returned home - a modest ranch house she shares with her daughters - last November, determined not to let the memory of what happened in it drive her out.

Her friends, family and co-workers have rallied to her side, raising money, sending flowers, offering to buy home heating oil.

"People in this community have really stepped up. Everybody supported me, but more so, they supported my family when it first happened," Tarleton said.

Now, her life centers on her recovery, her daughters and the busy schedule of doctor's appointments she keeps. She still has open wounds on her head and chest and expects to have more surgeries after she heals more.

At home, she listens to television, has books read to her and takes arm-in-arm walks in the yard with big sister Kesstan Blandin, 41, who shares caregiving duties with mother Joan Blandin and a visiting nurse who comes once a week.

Her sister calls Tarleton "amazing" in her spirit, but says the emotional side of her recovery is a constant struggle.

"She gets frustrated. She went through her angry period. She has moments where she's depressed, just confronting the magnitude of it. What bothers her the most is having a sound mind and soul and having desires to interact with her children's lives, which she can't do as much as she wants.

"She's really a profoundly pragmatic person. She's a person of the world. She focuses on what she can do and accepts what she can't," said Blandin.

The girls - Hannah, 13, and Liza, 15 - don't seem to shy away or react to her looks, according to Tarleton, who says, "I'm still mom."

That much was evident during a recent interview. As Tarleton sat talking on her couch, the doorbell rang.

"Is Hannah there?" a boy asked when Tarleton's mother opened the door.

"Is it a young boy?" Tarleton called out from the couch. "What's his name?"

"Devin," came the reply.

"Oh, Devin," said Tarleton, before summoning her daughter.

A nurse at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, N.H., she hopes to return to nursing in some capacity, though she isn't sure what - yet.

"I was a bedside nurse," she said. "That's not what I'm going to be when I go back. Physically, I don't think I can be. I'm going to have eye issues that I wouldn't want to be around infections. But nursing is a very wide world of things to do. I've talked to my doctor several times. We'll come up with something for me to do."

George Pessotti, 61, a volunteer for the advocacy group Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, met with Tarleton a half-dozen times when she was still hospitalized and keeps in touch with her now.

He says the inner strength she had before her injury is helping her cope now.

"In Carmen's case, she had a lot of good qualities that help her through her burn injury," he said. "She looks you straight in the face, even though her eyes aren't there. She's keen on learning about burns, asks a lot of questions. She's a special person. She's got a strong will to live, despite this horrific injury," said Pessotti, who turned advocate after a 1979 gasoline explosion burned him over 85 percent of his body.

As for Rodgers, Tarleton has one question: Why?

Their marriage was rocky at the end, but she was happy with him for years, she said. He never hit her, abused her or raised his voice at her - until the attack, she said.

"I would probably ask him why, although I know the answer wouldn't cut it. I would ask him why, just to see if he had any idea about why he did it, but knowing that his answer might be - probably wouldn't be - sufficient for me," she said.

What he did is beyond forgiving, she said.

"He needs to pay the price. He needs to be in jail 'til he dies," she said. "If he needs to go to trial, then fine. He can look at all the pictures of when I first got injured."

If Rodgers is tried, Tarleton will likely be called on to testify, according to Deputy Orange County State's Attorney Robert DiBartolo. That's fine by her.

Her spirit - a buoyancy manifested in her chipper voice and optimistic view of the future - continues to impress those around her.

"I've learned, through her, the lesson that you can't control what happens to you, but life is held in how you respond," said her sister. "You're far stronger than you ever knew."

"For whatever reason, Carmen was chosen for that fate. But what she's demonstrating is something that's in the human spirit itself, and it's an awesome thing to watch," Blandin said.

Section: NEWS04

Record Number: 809080385

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