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BODY:

For Bill and Kathy Wilder, of Signal Mountain, a September Saturday event last fall became a very personal sort of 9/11 that changed their family's world.

Kirk -- at 21, the youngest of their three sons -- was stabbed in the head at a fraternity party at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, where he was a junior. If he survived, they were advised, he could have brain damage.

With that news began the family's arduous odyssey toward healing along a path where progress is plotted in tiny increments. Even now, more than nine months later, the halting passage continues, said Mrs. Wilder, 52.

"The journey toward Kirk's rehabilitation is heartbreaking, slow, frustrating," she said. "We still have far to go, especially in the area of speech."

This Father's Day is "somewhat different," according to Mr. Wilder, 51, a property insurance company executive. He said he planned to be in Chattanooga without his wife and Kirk, who are at Michigan's University of Language and Literacy for a six-week speech-recovery program.

Though the wheelchair, brace and cane the young man earlier relied on have bowed to returning strength and independent walking, young Mr. Wilder still hasn't regained full right-side function, according to physical therapists.

While he responds to requests, acknowledges conversation and reacts appropriately to such stimuli as jokes and hugs, he hasn't reclaimed his verbal skills. Word retrieval -- taking messages from thought to speech -- still eludes the A-B student, who'd been majoring in business and Spanish.

"His perceptive language is quite good, but his expressive language is more challenging," said Charlotte Huffaker, 48, Kirk's aunt and an educational diagnostician who works with learning-disabled clients.

"He looks at each word as I read it and points to pictures. Most of the time, if he gets the initial sound, he can verbalize."

"He can't speak fluently, but we're working to get the flow back, and he can sing quite well. Words that he can't make in isolation, he can sing."

Such seeming baby steps have been an unfamiliar experience for a young man who was a high school soccer star, led an active sports life and spent last summer wrangling horses out West, according to Mrs. Wilder.

"Kirk was one of those sons who really had everything going for him -- smart, articulate, funny, a hard worker, a fun sociable guy," she said.

Still, she said each improvement, however small, is cause for thanks.

"Our lives will never be the same," she said, "but we are a loving family bonded together in working toward Kirk's best recovery as our goal."

WAKING TO A NIGHTMARE

Mr. and Mrs. Wilder had attended an evening church function at Signal Mountain Presbyterian on Sept. 10. They'd turned in early that night.

"We'd been asleep when the call came," said Mr. Wilder. "I crumbled to the floor. We were numb."

The pair bolted to Tuscaloosa so hurriedly that Mr. Wilder failed to pack underwear, he said. But they changed destinations en route when another caller phoned with word that their son had been airlifted to Birmingham.

They arrived at UAB Hospital around 8 a.m. on Sept. 11, said Mrs. Wilder, a Realtor. "Kirk had just gotten there, and they let us see him right away," she said.

"He was lying unconscious and shaking all over, with this huge knife sticking out of his head."

As a surgical team worked to free the butterfly-type blade that had pierced the young man's temple and plunged to the base of his skull, his parents cobbled together accounts of the knifing attack, they said.

It had happened when two men who'd crashed the fraternity party were asked to leave, according to police reports cited by the Tuscaloosa News.

Beer bottles supposedly were thrown. Blows allegedly were exchanged. The younger Mr. Wilder, then outside with his girlfriend, Allison Braden, 21, was hit by a windmilling slash during the fracas, according to his father.

In a recent phone interview, Ms. Braden said she vividly remembers what occurred that evening, although her boyfriend, whom she's since visited often, "has no memory at all of the attack," said the Nashville woman.

"From what I saw that night, I didn't think his recovery would be like it's been," she said. "It's been miraculous; I thought it would be much worse."

Two days after the assault, the man accused of attacking the young Mr. Walker was arrested in Missouri, brought to Alabama and charged with attempted murder. He has remained in Tuscaloosa County Jail awaiting a late summer court date, according to news reports.

The Wilders' trials, however, were already under way.

THE FIRST FOUR MONTHS

Wingfield Fisher, UAB Hospital's chief neurosurgeon, led Kirk's four-hour Sept. 11 surgery. He declined to comment for this story.

"At first, we got the feeling the knife had done minimal tissue damage," Mr. Wilder said, "but by the next day, that changed dramatically.

"We were asking about sight and paralysis, but step one really was, is he (Kirk) going to make it through the day?"

The young man remained in intensive care for roughly three weeks, his medical reports tempered by both encouraging and unfavorable aspects.

Kirk had suffered a stroke in the part of the brain that controls speech, memory and right-body function, according to Mr. Wilder. Yet tests also showed "that blood flow hadn't been compromised to the area," Mr. Wilder said.

Kirk's carotid artery had been severed and was removed, said his father.

"I hear 'carotid,' I think 'massive blood loss,'" he said, "but the blade had pinched the artery in a way that Kirk actually lost very little blood."

The young man's early setbacks ranged from pneumonia to a 40-pound weight loss. Even after discharge from the Alabama hospital, he faced weeks of rehabilitation in two Atlanta centers, where a slight motion in his right arm or leg, or a single word's expression, were hailed as milestones.

Therapy may have been more difficult for Kirk to endure than for some patients, said Kelly Marley, 28, a speech language pathologist who worked with him several times a day during his stay at Atlanta's Shepherd Center.

"With many brain injuries, the person isn't aware enough to be frustrated," she said. "Kirk knew what he had lost; it was hard for him."

Besides right-limb dysfunction, the young man's injury had left him with aphasia -- impaired ability to read, write and process speech -- and apraxia, or problems with the physical formation of sounds, according to Ms. Marley.

"Apraxia is hard to overcome," she said. "There's no quick fix for it, but Kirk was progressing steadily when he left. His first word was 'Allison.'"

Ms. Marley was impressed by her young patient's attitude, she said.

"He was so determined to get his thoughts expressed," she said. "He'd want to keep going, even after he'd get tired and I said we had to quit."

Mrs. Wilder said her son's steely resolve served him well when Kirk's rehabilitation entered a new phase with his January return to Chattanooga.

"He has always been such a fighter," she said. "I think his persistence, and all the support we've received, are what's helped him most all along."

OUTPOURING OF CARE

From the onset of Kirk's injury, his family has been beneficiary of immense support that has taken myriad forms, according to his parents.

At times, it was so overwhelming that Mr. Wilder said he "wore a hat and sunglasses" to disguise himself from unknown well-wishers he encountered even at the voting booth.

"We had a 'faithless hour,'" he recently told parishioners at church, "but your support and blessings have undergirded us since September 11."

Within hours of the young man's surgery, the church's Web site had daily postings, detailing his status and specific goals for "prayer warriors."

"The church Web site usually gets 1,000 hits a week," said Mrs. Wilder. "The first week after Kirk's injury, it got 25,000 hits."

To date, Kirk's paternal aunt Linda Denley has filled five scrapbooks with caring notes that came by post or computer. Even as they arrived, his maternal aunt Alice Thatcher "took over my Realtor job," said Mrs. Wilder.

While Mr. Wilder's partners in his property casualty insurance business shouldered chores at the family's river house, neighbors assumed upkeep of the Wilders' Signal Mountain residence and

tended their six pets, according to Mr. Wilder.

But he said it was the same story away from home, where gestures of aid ran the gamut from lodging to prayers from as far away as Uganda.

"We were virtually gone from home four months," he said, "and we only paid one week's rent. It's been such a team effort all along."

WHAT LIES AHEAD

Of late, the "team effort" for Kirk's recovery has involved physical therapy several times a week at Fusion, where he has regained strength through pursuits such as swimming, golf and rowing, therapists say.

His trainers have been Brendon McBride, 35, who helped Kirk hone his sports skills in high school, and Anne Sharpe, 28, a physical therapist.

"We're trying to get the pathways (from brain to limbs) refired," she said, "and Kirk is working very hard."

Rehab also has entailed treatment in Erlanger's hyperbaric oxygen chamber and thrice-weekly sessions with Mrs. Huffaker. She said their activities have included story-building with picture cards, tracing words on a salt bed and eliciting speech, via music.

Ms. Braden's role in the ongoing recovery has been "encouraging Kirk, trying to give him independence and not treat him like he's any different," she said. "I'll be there for him as long as it takes. Forever."

On May 14, Mrs. Wilder and her son went to Michigan for a six-week stint at what she called, "the best aphasia school in the country."

Heartened by its reported success at treating acquired speech problems, the family still faces uncertainty about what lies ahead, according to Mr. Wilder. He said, "We don't know what the future holds for Kirk."

"But we've learned the value of patience, and we're confident that the Lord has a plan for Kirk," he said. "We look forward to the day when complete healing will take place as far as Kirk can go."

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