

After crash caused internal decapitation, Yorba Linda woman's recovery is 'a miracle'

Alexis Evans is continuing to make strides after she suffered a massive injury in a December car crash.

The 23-year-old strides across the studio floor, each step a deliberate, thoughtful, remarkable placement of footing on the laminate tile.

The farther Alexis Evans can walk, and the less help she needs doing it, the more miraculous the feat.

Seven months after a car crash that could have ended her life, the Yorba Linda resident is living, talking, and walking. She's smiling, fist-bumping, and practicing using chopsticks.

The injury she suffered is as serious as it sounds: atlanto-occipital dislocation, also known as internal decapitation. In a rear-end crash along the 91 Freeway in December, Alexis' cervical spinal cord was injured, causing paralysis that doctors initially believed would inhibit her from talking or moving much beyond her eyes.

That she survived at all was a rarity, said Dr. David Patterson, the rehabilitation and medical director at Casa Colina Hospital and Centers for Healthcare in Pomona, where Alexis goes five days a week for outpatient therapy. People who experience the same injury usually do not make it to the hospital, he said. Those who do survive are typically quadriplegic.

There were moments shortly after the crash when "I think they weren't sure whether she would even survive it," said Dr. Suranee Waleszonia, one of Alexis' neuropsychologists, during a recent physical therapy session. "But she's done remarkably well."

Four days before Christmas, Alexis was driving to her job as a file clerk at a law office in Santa Ana when she was rear-ended as she slowed for traffic on the westbound 91 near Imperial Highway, according to a crash report from the California Highway Patrol.

Video of the crash captured on another car's camera at the scene showed the brake lights on the Jeep that hit Alexis did not illuminate before colliding with her bumper, the report, provided to the Orange County Register by Kathy Evans, Alexis' mom, said.

At the scene, the driver of the Jeep told a CHP trooper he was going about 65 mph; he said he pressed on the brakes but the car didn't slow, according to the report.

The trooper tested the car later, writing that the brakes "appeared to be working properly."

Several bystanders pulled Alexis from her 2012 red Ford Fiesta, the report said. Hospital staff at Orange County Global Medical Center, where Alexis was first taken after the crash, told Kathy Evans that a nurse at the scene began performing CPR until paramedics arrived.

That a nurse was there and helped was a “miracle,” Waleszonia said. “She wouldn’t have probably made it if not for that.”

People who experience a spinal cord injury like Alexis’ — which disrupts the nerves sending signals from the brain to the rest of the body — typically suffer respiratory failure “because there’s no message getting to your diaphragm to tell you to breathe,” Patterson explained.

After the crash, Alexis had surgery to reattach her spinal column to her skull, Kathy Evans said. Another procedure inserted a tracheostomy tube so she could breathe.

Initial fears were that she would suffer a condition called “locked-in syndrome,” in which she would have normal cognitive function but be unable to physically move beyond her eyes, Patterson said. She could not breathe on her own and was taught how to signal “yes” and “no” with just her eyes.

But during sensory exams after she was transferred to Casa Colina’s hospital, Alexis was repeatedly signaling that she could feel below her injured neck, Patterson said.

That she’s come this far, “it’s nothing short of a miracle, to be frank,” he said.

“Usually, you don’t even survive and make it to the hospital with this type of injury. If you survive, usually you’re severely quadriplegic and you’re very disabled,” Patterson said, noting that those who survive usually rely on assisted breathing machines.

“So here she is with tubes out, moving her legs, standing. That’s kind of crazy,” he said. “It’s just incredible.”

The recovery process has been painstaking at times for Alexis, who grew up an athlete, playing softball in high school and in a travel league. She had been studying for the LSAT at the time of the crash with the hope of going to law school. A UC Berkeley graduate, Alexis had studied political science.

While she was in the hospital, her determination to get better went “up and down,” Alexis said. “Sometimes I wanted to give up.”

But in those moments, it was her family support that kept her going, she said: “They never give up on me.”

Alexis said she and her family have reached out for encouragement from other survivors of the same injury. One of them was former Cal State Fullerton baseball player Jon Wilhite. The lone survivor in a car carrying Angels pitcher Nick Adenhardt and two other friends during a 2009 crash,

Wilhite was believed to be the first Orange County resident [to live after suffering internal decapitation](#).

His recovery was seen as a medical miracle, too. Less than a year after his injury, Wilhite was back to gym workouts and moving into the Manhattan Beach apartment he shared with his brother. Over the past 13 years, several people who have suffered similar neck injuries have reached out to Wilhite, and he's shared his story. He acknowledges that his case was an "extremely, extremely lucky one" because while his vertebrae separated from his skull, "luckily my spinal cord stayed intact," the 37-year-old said in an interview this week.

"But I just kind of realize that hopefully just them seeing me or hearing my story gives them a little hope," Wilhite said.

The message Alexis has taken away from Wilhite and others who have been through what she has is just, simply, "don't give up," she said.

Dreaming of her future and "the thought of getting back close to where I was" keeps her pushing forward. She hopes to eventually study international law and become an attorney who negotiates international peace treaties, she said.

Meanwhile, Patterson said he encouraged Alexis and her family to explore the possibility of stem cell therapy that can be used to address spinal cord injuries. [A GoFundMe page](#) has been set up to help raise money for the treatment, which Patterson said can cost upward of \$50,000. As of Thursday morning, supporters had donated more than \$33,000 to the fundraiser.

During a physical therapy session in July, Alexis trekked back and forth across the room at the clinic in Casa Colina's Transitional Living Center. It was the first time in her six weeks of physical therapy that she's done the walk with the help of just one physical therapist, who positioned herself underneath Alexis' right shoulder for stability and help with her gait.

While she walked, a machine attached to a track on the ceiling and strapped to Alexis' torso held up 30% of her body weight while she moved the rest.

"It's all hard," she said of the hours of rehab she's putting in each day. "But it's good."

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