

THE SOUNDER

REHAB / *Young woman defies doctors' prognosis*

Hope is healing

Last May, Denise and Ron Lepchuk of White Rock were busy teaching their daughter to walk. Not a surprising task for parents. However, the Lepchuks' daughter Vanessa is 28 years old. Her ability to walk was challenged on May 8 when she was struck by a vehicle in a crosswalk.

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Now Contributor

Vanessa's story is an intriguing one about the healing powers of the mind. Her doctors are baffled and consider her case a miracle. From the extent of her injury, they can't understand why she isn't quadriplegic (paralyzed below the neck).

Lacking a medical explanation, doctors told her she must have a guardian angel. Vanessa takes that diagnosis seriously. She believes the biggest reason she isn't paralyzed is because of two guardian angels, "My Grandpa Mike and Grandma B." Vanessa refers to her grandfather Mike Lepchuk and great-grandmother Rose Bieraugle. Don't believe in guardian angels? That's too bad. Research shows anything that keeps you hopeful and thinking positive can have major effects on recovery.

Rick Hansen recognized Vanessa's "incredible attitude and determination," commending her at his Wheels in Motion event on June 10. Vanessa (as part the G.F. Strong Rehab Team) participated in the event, which funds research and helps those living with spinal cord

injury. In one week, Vanessa raised more than \$11,000 – the second highest individual total in Canada – impressing Hansen, and leaving Vanessa herself feeling overwhelmed by the donations from family, friends and co-workers. She was also excited to meet her idol, Rick Hansen. There's no doubt Hansen sees Vanessa as his idol, too. He was particularly touched that just weeks after her accident, Vanessa was already driven to help others less fortunate than herself.

Several factors may have contributed to Vanessa's miraculous recovery. First, Vanessa was conscious at her accident. Despite the awkward position she was lying in, she demanded no one move her until the ambulance arrived (something she learned from her father Ron, a Surrey firefighter). Second, the accident happened close to Vancouver General Hospital and she was operated on immediately. Third, she was physically fit, enjoying several activities and hitting the gym regularly. A strong body recovers quickly. And finally, there's no overlooking her mindset: a big focus on hope.

"Never lose hope – don't give up," is what Vanessa says she'll tell anyone who has been through a crisis. During her stay in G.F. Strong, she learned of those who progressed from a critical state to regaining the use of paralyzed limbs months (sometimes years) after their accidents.

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Defying the odds, one step at a time

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Following her surgery, her initial meeting with specialists was bleak.

"I needed to be at a level four to be able to walk again, and I was at level three."

The prognosis was she probably wouldn't walk again and may need a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

Vanessa and her family took the news hard. But Vanessa wouldn't accept the diagnosis. Later, alone with family in her room, she kicked out her leg in anger – a leg that hadn't responded until then.

"That's when I knew for sure I was going to walk again!"

Vanessa was stubbornly on her feet during her long rehabilitation sessions, five days a week. Her spinal cord injury at C-5 and C-6 (the neck vertebrae) resulted in the two disks being fused together. The initial damage was serious – affecting the feeling in her legs, arms and fingers. Her doctors are amazed she was on her feet exercising so soon, although it took longer to regain full use

of her hands and fingers.

Vanessa has agreed to participate in an ongoing study where her progress will be monitored. She is a rarity, in that few people have had spinal surgery so soon after trauma. Vanessa's case may offer valuable insight to the benefit of quick medical intervention and expand our understanding of spinal injury treatment.

Her progress is encouraging. But most impressive about Vanessa's story is her steadfast determination: Only days after her accident and right after her devastating diagnosis, Vanessa mailed a reply confirming her

attendance at her cousin's September wedding. She fully expected to be there. No doubt she'll be dancing up a storm.

See Vanessa in *Wheels in Motion* video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G97xGQI7r50>

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VANESSA LEPCHUK/
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