



After falling down a cliff face, **the 11-year-old was never expected to be whole again**—a verdict neither she nor her parents would accept

SAVING *Natalie*

BY LYNNE SCHUYLER

RICK AND SUE LACHOWICZ barely recognized their daughter in the hospital emergency room. Eleven-year-old Natalie's body was a mess of pine needles, missing teeth, broken ribs and multiple lacerations. The left side of her skull had been crushed, exposing her brain. In the afternoon of September 26, 1997, Rick and Sue had learned that their two children, Natalie and her brother, Mark, 13, had fallen from a cliff face while climbing rugged hills behind their home east of Kamloops, B.C. Mark fell to his death attempting to help

Natalie when she lost her footing and tumbled 30 metres down the mountainside. When a nurse quietly told the Lachowicz doctors didn't think Natalie would make it through the night, Rick, crying, bent down and tenderly kissed his daughter's swollen face.

Natalie did survive that first night, but in the bleak days that followed, doctors told her parents their daughter's chances of emerging from her coma were slim. Even if she did gain consciousness, the damage to her brain was so severe she probably would never speak or walk again.

BRIAN HOWELL

Happily married for 20 years, Sue, a bank administrator, and Rick, a pulp-mill insulation mechanic, loved their jobs. They were an athletic family who skied and biked together. Mark, a top junior golfer, was a lovable prankster; tomboyish and smart, Natalie was his constant sidekick.

Now, the Lachowiczses would have to prepare for Mark's funeral. Rick felt he had nothing left to live for. Sue, focused on Natalie's survival, buried her pain. Natalie needs us, she thought. Somehow we'll get through this.

DURING the funeral reception a week after the accident, the Lachowiczses got word that Natalie had shown signs of awakening. They rushed to the hospital to wait as she slowly stirred. "Hi, Dad," Natalie said hoarsely. Rick sobbed and cradled her in his arms.

From that moment, Rick and Sue had absolute faith their daughter would make it—despite CT scans and tests that revealed the severity of Natalie's injuries. The part of her brain controlling muscle movement was damaged, leaving her with partial paralysis on her right side. She'd also damaged the part of the brain that controls language and comprehension, resulting in aphasia—for example, Natalie would be confused when asked her name and age. She followed Sue with her eyes but spoke only to Rick. Her short-term memory, too, was impaired; she'd ask, "Where's Mark?" and sob when told he'd been killed. But, days later, she would ask again.

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Seven weeks after the accident, Natalie's condition was stable, and in December, she entered Vancouver's Sunny Hill Health Centre for Children. Natalie's all-consuming needs were all that kept Rick and Sue going. Taking leaves from work, the couple shuttled between Vancouver and Kamloops. It tore Rick's heart to watch his daughter wobble like an infant at the parallel bars, dragging her right leg and foot. One day they watched as Natalie took her first small steps. She looked up—her head shaved and scarred—and broke into a toothless grin, her blue eyes shining over this small victory.

Natalie left Sunny Hill in January 1998—her physical therapy could now be done at home. Surgery to reconstruct her skull with a Kevlar plate was scheduled for April. "You'll have a nice life with her," doctors said, "but don't expect her to graduate from high school or live on her own."

RICK AND Sue read up on brain injury. They learned that with intensive rehab, the greatest gains would take place within the first three months, followed by slower recovery for up to two years. So they juggled their jobs around the daily visits of therapists and support workers, and got caught up in an exhausting routine to help their daughter learn simple tasks. Sue drew pictures of objects and labelled them, taping notes around the house to jog Natalie's memory. She watched as Natalie attempted to fill a glass, juice sloshing everywhere. Natalie's face



(Left to right) Natalie with her dog, Bob, at B.C.'s Children's Hospital in November 1997; Natalie and Mark, vacationing in Connecticut in July 1995.

screwed up in frustration. "I can't do it!" she cried out. "Then we'll get a bigger glass," said Sue. When dishes slipped from Natalie's hands, Sue bought unbreakable plates. Constant repetition worked best, but it was frustrating. Sue spent hours just teaching her to zip her jeans or lift a fork to her mouth.

Natalie had to relearn language skills as well and had daily sessions with a speech therapist. Every night, after her eight-hour day at the bank, Sue would spread out flash cards and patiently teach Natalie the alphabet. Panic flitted across the girl's face as her brain searched for words erased from her vocabulary. Natalie, who once devoured books such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, looked at toddlers' books and complained, "Why am I reading these?"

Through the tears and setbacks, Sue could see a frightened 12-year-old fighting to get her life back. She could tell Natalie feared she'd be this way forever, but in the fall of 1998, tests revealed Natalie had the capacity to make gains: Her damaged brain cells would never regenerate, but other cells would learn to take over, improving with challenge and stimulation.

WHEN IT was time for Natalie to return to school, Sue made sure she would not be put in a special-needs class where she wouldn't be challenged. The school agreed to place her in an adapted Grade 7 program with a full-time aide to take notes for her.

Because brain-injured people prefer structure and routine, Natalie pan-

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icked if a teacher deviated from the planned lesson. She often phoned Sue, crying, "Come and get me!" It would take all day to calm her. Her brain had to work extra hard to keep up. She struggled to follow teachers' directions. She didn't understand conversations and jumped in at the wrong moment. Absorbing new information all day was draining. Plagued by fatigue, she missed more than 50 days of school a year. A few teachers thought her lazy.

By August 1999, Sue decided to quit the job she loved. Natalie was in the fight of her life and needed her mother full-time. In the room that Rick and Sue had outfitted with learning supplies, a blackboard and physiotherapy equipment, Sue worked with Natalie on her homework, helping hone her language skills and study for exams. Highlighter in hand, Sue underlined text and explained its meaning to her daughter. Assignments that would take someone else an hour might take Natalie three. As she passed grades 7 to 10, progress came not from breakthroughs but by building on each small success.

At school, it irked her when friends offered to "walk slow" as she limped behind. Conversations often fell into uneasy silences as she struggled for words. They were puzzled that she could be giggly one moment, then burst into tears over minor things the next.

Natalie's mood swings, stemming from her brain injury, were tough on Sue and Rick, too. One day Sue finally

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(Left to right) Sue, Natalie and Rick at the Courage to Come Back Awards banquet in Vancouver in April 2000.



lost her cool and yelled back. Natalie stared; she hadn't seen that side of her mother in years. Inwardly, Sue smiled, happy to feel like a normal parent again.

Natalie made huge gains by grades 11 and 12, and her drive to do well was apparent. Adapted courses, extra time for tests and her learning assistant meant good grades throughout high school. Her moodiness gradually gave way to a more outgoing, upbeat nature. Natalie missed

sports but found other interests. She spoke at schools, telling younger kids about brain injuries, and was thrilled to go on a class trip to Europe.

On the June 2004 day Natalie would graduate from high school with honours, Sue gave her a specially bound book. She pored over the letters and photos from family and friends telling her how proud they were that she'd come so far. Later, Rick and Sue wept as Natalie walked across the stage to accept her diploma, with friends cheering and whistling. So many had predicted they'd never see this day.

Two months later, the 18-year-old left for a ten-month Rotary Club trip to Brazil. Some of her doctors were skeptical she could handle a new language, let alone the challenges of another culture. But Rick and Sue were convinced it could be a turning point, since challenges and stimulation helped brain cells reroute and adapt.

Natalie had a tough time at first. Though her hosts were informed of her brain injury, they were upset when she struggled with the Portuguese language despite the hard work she put into learning it. They didn't understand her need for ten to 12 hours of sleep and quiet times to recharge instead of socializing every night.

That October, Natalie called her mother, crying. "I'm coming home," she told her. Unfazed, Sue counselled her to hang in there. So Natalie did. She found another family to live with, eventually learned the language and travelled throughout Brazil with her Rotary group.

Rick and Sue were amazed by the confident young woman who returned home in June 2005. Emboldened, Natalie left for Europe in July, tackling 11 countries in ten weeks—by herself. Train and subway schedules confused her, but she didn't get lost. "Two years ago, I couldn't even read a map or remember to look before I crossed the street," she marvelled. She loved every minute of her adventure, especially because other travellers treated her as a normal young woman. They saw only a bright and articulate Canadian named Natalie.

Today, ten years after the accident, Mark is still never far from the Lachowicz's thoughts. "We have pain, but we also have joy," Rick says quietly. Recovery will be a lifelong process for Natalie, but her days are rich and full. She's grateful her parents never gave up on her. "They're my heroes," she says.

Natalie recently moved to New Westminster, B.C., and is attending Douglas College. She plans to become a teacher. In 2006, Sue was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She says: "Natalie would disagree, but I know her goal to teach has already been achieved. Her decision to live her life full of enthusiasm and joy despite her challenges is a lesson for each of us. As I battle incurable breast cancer, I hold her indomitable spirit close to my heart. In spite of my illness, my days are filled with love and laughter. Natalie has taught me well."