

## Profile in Courage (and Love)

An accident took much from Lilly Barnett. But her determination, and the support of family and friends, have given this young girl hope

BY JESSICA GORDON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON



Lilly Barnett holds "Bunny," a stuffed animal that has brought comfort throughout her ordeal.

Once you hear Lilly Barnett's story, chances are you will never forget it. It has elements of both fairy tales and nightmares, and at its core, it's a testament to the strength and resilience of the human spirit and the power of love.

A tragic accident that claimed one life and altered countless others is neither the beginning nor end of Lilly's story. But it does divide her life — and the lives of her mom Kelly, dad Bryan and younger sister Summer — into two very different chapters: before July 26, 2011, and after.

It was a warm Tuesday night when Bryan Barnett kissed then 9-year-old Lilly goodbye as she headed out for dinner with her grandmother. "I told her I loved her and watched her be-bop out of here," he recalls. "Four hours later, I was in a helicopter."

The helicopter was carrying Lilly to Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Children's Hospital (often referred to as A.I.) in Wilmington. She was unresponsive and clinging to life after a motorcycle traveling more than 120 mph slammed into the side of Lilly's grandmother's Lexus sedan as she crossed Route 1 near Milford. The motorcyclist died at the scene. Lilly's grandmother suffered

minor injuries, but the young girl in the back seat on the passenger side took almost the entire force of the collision. She suffered extensive injuries, from broken ribs and collapsed lungs to a bruised liver.

The most serious harm, however, was to her brain. She had suffered a severe traumatic diffuse axonal injury (DAI), which is a major cause of persistent vegetative state following head trauma.

"It's basically shaken-baby syndrome in an older child," explains Bryan. Based on what they saw at the time, doctors at A.I. told Bryan and Kelly that their daughter, in all likelihood, would need to be fed through a tube and breathe with the help of a ventilator for the rest of her life.

"It was a very overwhelming, helpless scenario," says Bryan, remembering that even though he was surrounded by family at the time, he had never felt so isolated. "It was the loneliest part of my life because I love Kelly deeply and there was nothing I could do for her. Even though we were together, there was nothing I could do to assuage what she was feeling."

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Weeks and months of heartache and dealing with the shock of such a sudden, life-altering event followed. Many of the Barnetts' questions about their daughter's future were unanswerable.

But Lilly fought back, defied the odds, regained consciousness and made amazing progress during her time at A.I. When she finally came home in December 2011, nearly five months after the accident, the Barnetts remained committed to doing whatever they could to aid her recovery.

That included trying to improve her strength, so they got in touch with Sasha Westray, owner of The SW Studio in Lewes, to help with increasing Lilly's core strength and balance. Lilly enjoyed spending time with Westray, and the Barnetts felt it was beneficial, so they

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Mariner Middle School student Lilly Barnett, with mom Kelly and dad Bryan, hugs her younger sister Summer.

sought more strength training for her. “That’s when we called Paul,” says Kelly.

Paul Timmons, owner of The Firm Fitness Center near Rehoboth Beach and a friend of the family, was honored they thought of him. However, “my first response was ‘no — this is not what I do. I am not qualified for this,’” he recalls. “But out of respect for Bryan, I agreed to at least chat [with] and meet Lilly.”

Timmons says it took about 30 seconds of conversation for him to decide he would do what he could to help. It wasn’t long before he hit upon an idea: to introduce her to indoor rowing.

“Rowing requires the coordination of multiple joints in a cohesive manner,” Timmons explains; from a muscular and neurological perspective, he thought it would be a good fit for her rehabilitation.

He was right.

“She’s gotten so much stronger since starting workouts,” notes Bryan, adding that her time in a wheelchair has dropped dramatically since working with the two trainers, from nearly 100 percent of the time to 75 percent. (Besides time spent rowing, she is able to walk unassisted for short periods.)

Not only has rowing had physical benefits, it has also motivated Lilly and given her goals to work toward. In February, she competed in and won the Main Line Slide indoor rowing competition in Ardmore, Pa., in the adaptive category. Less than

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one month later, Lilly and her family traveled to Boston to compete in the C.R.A.S.H.-B. Sprints World Indoor Rowing Championship. She won there, too.

“Competing keeps her engaged and gives her a goal,” says Bryan.

For Lilly, what she enjoys most about rowing is something she’s not able to do otherwise: “I like to go fast.”

The social aspect of going to the gym is also a positive, say her parents. Lilly also enjoys working with Timmons, whom she describes as “always upbeat.” Which, interestingly, is how most people describe Lilly.

“She’s a warrior,” says Westray, who notes that Lilly is always full of smiles and laughs easily. “She’s determined and always positive.”

Bryan points to another admirable trait: “Brain injuries can come with a lot of negative components, but Lilly’s just gotten sweeter. She never complains or feels sorry for herself. Kelly and I have days of feeling sorry for ourselves, but she never does.”

Now a sixth-grader at Mariner Middle School in Milton, Lilly is in mainstream classes and a straight-A student, just as she was before the accident. “We just have to help her a little more; she’s just a little slower,” says Kelly. Lilly enjoys things most kids her age do, like cheerleading, making Rainbow Loom creations with her sister and reading books.

While it’s not always easy to remain positive, perspective helps the family cope with the changes they’ve endured. “I feel like everyone should go up to A.I.; their problems will disappear,” says Kelly, who acknowledges that their time in the children’s hospital made her realize there are people in much worse situations than they.

Both parents add that the support they have received from the community since the accident has been overwhelming. “Sussex County is the best place on Earth,” declares Bryan. “We haven’t asked anyone for anything, but people have come out of the woodwork.”

Although Lilly has come a long way since her days in A.I., there is no mistaking the severity of her injuries or the impact the accident has had on all of their lives. When speaking, she forms words slowly, and when walking, another person must be nearby if support is needed. “There are many positive components to Lilly’s life,” says Bryan. “The border of her puzzle has been put back together. But the middle of the puzzle is still missing.”

What the future holds for the Barnetts is unknown. “We haven’t approached the ‘This Is Your Life’ yet, because we don’t know if her issues now will be issues in 10 years,” says Bryan. “But there’s this ray of hope — where is this story going to end?”

And, at the end of the day, Lilly has a family that supports, motivates and loves her, and loves one another. “We’ve been married for 18 years,” says Bryan of his relationship with Kelly. “If this didn’t break us, nothing’s going to.” ■

JESSICA GORDON, a freelancer who lives in Lewes, is a frequent contributor to Delaware Beach Life and has written for The News Journal and Delaware Today magazine.



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