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Breaking her silence

Six years after being struck by a hit-and-run driver, Faith Flagg speaks



Faith Flagg,
with her mother,
Sharon Crowe

STORY PAGE 10

Column Six

Vaccine vexation

BY COLIN BREZICKI
SPECIAL TO THE VOICE

I read somewhere that positive thinking and laughter will keep you in touch with your inner self and strengthen your immune system. If that shot in the arm doesn't work for you then maybe you should get the vaccine.

I received my first Pfizer dose last week, but getting there cost me a good deal of positivity and didn't provide many laughs.

On the day the Ontario government opened up vaccine bookings for my age group I went online first thing. In minutes I had entered my health card details and cruised my way through to the appointments calendar.

I hit a wall.

The calendar was unresponsive. It had zero vital signs, and not in a good way. Like Monty Python's parrot the calendar was bereft of life, had shuffled off its mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the choir invisible.

I went back and tried again. Several times. Same result. I spent a good part of the morning trying to pick the lock. I ran through all of April and May, at centres in St Catharines, Beamsville and Grimsby.

Nada.

See COLUMN SIX back page

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



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Keeping FAITH

BY HELEN TRAN
VOICE CORRESPONDENT

Six years ago last week, high clouds and low fog obscured a bright, waxing moon as midnight passed into early morning. The breeze was cold—just above freezing—with westerly gusts making it feel colder. It was a chilly walk for a small group of teenagers trudging west along Canboro Road, under orange streetlights, a little after 2 AM. No one could know that within seconds all of their lives would be changed forever—none more so than 17-year-old Faith Flagg's.

Behind them a ten-year-old Toyota convertible was climbing the steep incline of Church Hill. At the wheel was 41-year-old Anderson Wormald, owner of The Broken Gavel restaurant, in Fenwick. He had been drinking at a Fonthill bar until closing time, and was now heading home.

Just after bearing left from Church Hill onto Canboro, on level ground parallel with the Fonthill United Church, Anderson rammed into Faith Flagg and a male teenager.

While the boy sustained minor wounds to an arm, Flagg was thrown into the windshield, carried along on the Toyota's hood for dozens of feet, then thrown airborne an additional 60 feet, suffering further critical injuries on hitting the ground.

Wormald didn't stop. Instead, he fled five kilometres west, parking his car at his Fenwick apartment. He would be taken into custody later that morning after a civilian gave a crucial tip to the police. In a plea deal a year later, Wormald would be sentenced to 12 months in jail, two years' probation, 75 hours of community service, and a three-year driving prohibition, for dangerous operation of a motor vehicle causing bodily harm.

By the time Wormald finished serving his one-year sentence, the Flagg family was only just beginning to come to terms with the severe brain injuries that Faith sustained that night, and the stark truth that she would never be the same again.

After six years of near silence, during which her family focused on Faith's long and arduous recovery process, she and they are now ready to speak about what happened the night of the accident, and its aftermath. By providing a more detailed account of the events of April 3, 2015, and the severity of Faith's injuries and her recovery, they hope to shed light on the seriousness of brain injuries, and to raise funds and awareness for MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) Canada.

Now in her mid 20s, Faith continues to recover in the home of her mother, Sharon Crowe. These days, Faith is no longer bedridden, but she remains mostly housebound as she continues to undergo rigorous physical and emotional therapy.

"This was something that happened to me, and it changed my life," said Faith. "But I survived, and now it's time to tell my story."

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Six years later to the night—Canboro Road last week, just west of where it intersects with Church Hill. After being hit, Faith Flagg was thrown 60 feet, landing near the fire hydrant, centre right. DAVE BURKET

FAITH
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Seated in Sharon's living room, Faith smiled as she explained the significance of her t-shirt: the hashtag #ABI standing for "Acquired Brain Injury," a term defined by the Ontario Brain Injury Association as "damage to the brain that occurs after birth from a traumatic or non-traumatic event."

Between questions, she would often pause either to smile at her mother, or pet one of the four newborn puppies that one of the family dogs had just birthed. As her long recovery from the collision continues to progress, Faith has been re-learning how to do things in public that many take for granted, such as grocery shopping, or eating at a restaurant. While the COVID-19 pandemic has paused some of these outings, it has also shifted the focus to reflecting on how the accident has changed their family's lives, and what the future may hold.

"It was really hard to move forward," said Sharon, smiling through tears, "because she is completely different now, the Faith that we knew is gone."

"For the past six years, I call

the anniversary of my accident my celebration of life," said Faith. "I feel that it is my second birthday because after that night, I became a whole different person. Six years ago, someone made the choice to drink and drive and then chose the rest of my life for me. Everything that I knew in my 17 years was taken from me in one night, but I don't want it to be that way forever, so the life that I still have—I'm gonna make the most of it. Over the past six years we have been slowly rebuilding our lives and building back myself, my happiness, everything."

Before the accident, Faith helped her mother raise her younger sister and brother. Described by her siblings as the family's "Uber driver," Faith would take them to school, and accompany them to events and parties. She would go to the gym with her grandfather almost every night. Faith and Sharon were a team with Faith as a "mini mom," cooking dinner if Sharon was busy with work, Faith always there to cheer up the family and "make them smile and laugh every day."

All this would change in a gruesome instant that she, her family, and her friends can never forget.

Faith herself has no clear memory of what happened. What she knows from that night she has pieced together from remembered fragments and from eyewitness accounts of friends and family.

Faith's younger brother, Wyatt Flagg, who was there the night of the accident, had walked down the same street just 20 minutes earlier with his own group of friends. He made it to their friend Brianna's residence without incident and sat down to wait for Faith and her group to join them.

It was a walk they had done many times before, at the same hour of night, without incident. The neighbourhood was known for being safe and quiet, yet nonetheless the teens always practiced basic safety by walking in pairs and keeping to the side of the road. A sidewalk runs along the south side of street, while a green boulevard strip runs along the north side.

"It was supposed to be just another normal night," said Wyatt, who was 15 at the time of the hit-and-run, "in a normal everyday teenager's life."

While he was sitting inside the house, Wyatt suddenly heard a "crazy crash, bang, then all [Faith's] friends screaming and

calling her name."

He ran from the house, barefoot, to find his sister "lying there on the grass, bloody, bruised, with vehicle parts all around her. She was moaning, wheezing, just not verbal at that point. I was in shock and hysterical while holding her. I thought: this could be the last time I see my sister alive."

The group of teenagers that night was comprised of six friends, one of whom described how Faith had been pinned to Wormald's car and carried on the hood and windshield for some distance before she was thrown.

While Wyatt held Faith and tried to absorb the enormity of what had just happened, one of the teens' mothers called 911. The other teenagers in the group took turns comforting Faith. Wyatt distinctly remembers one friend holding Faith's hand and saying, "Faith, stay with us, we're right here, we got you."

The Niagara Falls Review would later report Wormald telling police that he thought "teenagers had thrown garbage" at his car, and he drove away because he didn't want to "confront a group of teens."

While questioning Wormald at 8 AM, an officer detected "a strong odour of an alcoholic beverage"

and said that Wormald appeared to be intoxicated. Because Wormald did not remain at the scene of the accident and was not subject to immediate testing for impairment, the Crown was unable to determine whether he was driving while impaired at the time of the collision.

According to Sharon, during the 911 call, one of the teenagers was asked to describe the driver and his justification for why he described them as drunk. He was driving erratically, the boy answered, with the tire tracks weaving in and out of peoples' lawns.

Wyatt described that night's toll as "heavy," and that the entire group was in shock from what they had witnessed.

"In a literal instant, this happened and she was laying there, and from that moment on it's never been the same. That image of her laying on the lawn, that image will never leave my head."

Faith's injuries from the accident were catastrophic. Every bone in her face was shattered. Her forehead was in pieces. Complete fracturing of her skull had pierced her brain in multiple places. The brain had been pushed down into her sinuses, and parts of her frontal lobe were destroyed—which

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has impacted emotion regulation, decision-making, memory, her vision, and sense of smell.

According to Faith's family and the medical professionals who tended to her that night, her survival was miraculous, yet she will never make a full recovery. The massive injuries to her internal organs, and the physical and mental toll of healing, has meant that she will experience constant pain for the rest of her life. She is unable to bear children. She has not regained full control or mobility in the left side of her body. Another injury to her head, however minor, could be fatal.

Faith has had hundreds of medical visits, and with a team of physiotherapists attending therapy feels like a full-time job. The costs have been astronomical—what the family describes as a small settlement received from a civil lawsuit against Wormald hasn't even begun to cover the expenses.

What helped the family get through the initial years following the accident was support they received from relatives, friends, and even strangers who would make donations to a GoFundMe campaign set up early on, as well as

people who dropped off food and gift cards.

"The scary thing is," said Faith, "if I was alone that night, I would have just been found dead in the morning."

This was the fate that met one of her relatives years ago, a boy riding his bike alone one night when he was struck by a drunk driver. He was found dead the next morning. He was also 17.

Sharon revealed that the civilian who gave the critical tip to police was Faith's own grandfather, Wes Crowe. Soon after the 911 call and after Faith had been taken to the hospital, Wes followed the trail of debris from the scene of the accident until he came upon unmistakable evidence that Wormald's convertible was the car that had struck the teenagers.

"He had run over a street sign," said Crowe, "and then parked sideways in his parking area — the [windshield] was smashed, the driver's window was down and one of mirrors had broken off. The whole hood was smashed." The car smelled of alcohol and vomit, and there was blood on the vehicle.

Crowe returned to the scene of the accident and told police what he'd found. Wormald was questioned and arrested. Although

Crowe, like the rest of the family, was disappointed by the brevity of Wormald's prison sentence — he would like to have seen "the key thrown away"—he had much praise for how the police handled the investigation.

When this guy was getting released from prison, Faith was just starting to try to get basic motor skills back," said her brother Wyatt. "She was still having a hard time going through daily life, even getting up and going to the washroom. She was bedridden for years. After, it was tough for me to go out and do things that Faith would normally do with me every day, knowing that she couldn't be with me. Thankfully, thank God I didn't lose my sister that night — but in a sense I did lose her, because she will never be the same person I grew up with for 16 years. That is something [Wormald] took away from me, our family, because of something he chose to do."

At his trial, Wormald's lawyer asked the judge to sentence him to six months. The Crown requested two years less a day.

According to reporting by the Niagara Falls Review, Crown Attorney Tyler Shuster told the

court, "The kids were doing nothing wrong that night. They weren't rowdy. They weren't harassing anybody. They weren't walking down the middle of the road."

Asked by the judge if he had anything to say, Wormald turned to face Faith's family and friends seated in the public gallery and said, "For the past 15 months, there have been threats of violence ... and social ostracization from a community that I love. Individuals have used this terrible incident for their own purposes, but none of this ever clouded my concern for you and your family and your loved ones."

"We thought [Wormald] should have got more time," said Wes Crowe. "Let's hope he learnt his lesson."

(Wormald did not respond to multiple requests for comment attempted through various channels. The Voice continues to welcome an opportunity to interview him. See Publisher's Corner, p.2, for a discussion of community reaction to the hit-and-run.)

Faith's grandmother Patti described the accident and the years following as "just a nightmare, and very hard to get over. But we are blessed to still have her. Her positive attitude carried us through it

— we would go up to the hospital in tears, and she would tell us: 'happy thoughts, happy thoughts.' We moved forward. It was very tough but we did... but we still don't want to forget."

To this day, Patti says that family members will feel goosebumps when they drive past where the accident happened, or past the restaurant where Wormald still works, though no longer as its owner.

Wormald's partner, Yvonne de Jong, told the Voice that she is now the sole owner of The Broken Gavel. She responded to a Voice request for comment with an expression of sympathy.

"My heartfelt thoughts and best wishes are with Miss Flagg and her family," wrote de Jong in an email.

When Faith finally regained consciousness in the hospital, her eyes were swollen shut and it was her mother who explained that she had been hit by a car. Faith's first words were to ask Sharon about the shift she was supposed to work at Tim Hortons the day after the accident. Faith described the fol-

See FAITH next page



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FAITH

continued from previous page

lowing days and nights as a haze of confusion—with her brain injuries she was unable to communicate or fully understand what had happened to her. Faith initially hoped that she only had a few broken bones and that she would be back in school within several days.

Three weeks after her release from the hospital, Faith and Sharon realized that brain fluids were leaking from her nose, a harrowing experience Faith described as feeling like drowning.

She was rushed back to the hospital for emergency surgery. During a full craniotomy, Faith was a surgically cut from ear to ear as the surgeons reconstructed her forehead and face, and attempted to lift her brain back into position to stop the leaking. Wormald's legal defense team would later describe this operation as a "minor surgery."

The pain during recovery was so great that Faith would lose hope many times.

"She just kept saying, 'Mom just let me die,'" said Sharon.

It was also at this time that Faith began to realize the full extent of her injuries and what they would mean for her future. She struggled to sit up, or even walk a few steps without the aid of a walker, and she was also devastated by the changes to her appearance. Her head had swollen from the brain surgery, and she could barely recognize herself after the facial reconstruction. It would be a full year before the Flagg family could start putting together a complete picture of the extent of Faith's injuries and what that would mean for her future.

"For someone else, Faith looks beautiful," said Sharon, "and they say 'You would never know what she's been through,' but for us, and Faith, even though she does look beautiful, she looks completely different."

Sharon gently swept back some blonde locks from Faith's hairline to reveal the surgical scar, and the slight bulge in Faith's forehead from the bone reconstruction. Even six years later, Faith still leaks fluid from her brain, and the bone in her reconstructed forehead is deteriorating, which means that a



Faith Flagg at 17.

FLAGG FAMILY

second surgery might be necessary in the future. The family is trying to avoid this for as long as possible, due to the risk that it might damage Faith's frontal lobe even further.

"Brain injuries are like a loss of who you are and who you feel like," said Faith. "My therapists always tell me that you can't think about what your life would have been, because those thoughts will eat you up, they make you miserable. For the past six years, I have woken up thinking where would I be if that person didn't drink and drive that night."

"It was a huge struggle," said Sharon. "I was working when it happened, two jobs, and just like that I was done. The accident just changed everybody's life so drastically. I pulled everybody together, to keep everybody strong and all I focused on was that Faith was alive."

Faith used the analogy of someone trying to function day-to-day as if they were a car running starting out with a full tank of gas. For someone with a brain injury, they are starting each day with only a

partial tank. The frustration of being unable to do simple things with her hands, like brush her teeth and open a shampoo bottle, as well as problems with her eyesight, racing thoughts, insomnia, and mood swings, would transform the previously happy teenager into someone who would struggle with depression and thoughts of suicide. Going on sleep and mood stabilizing medication helped, but there would be good days and bad days as she got used to the effects and dosages of each medication.

"I just wanted to get back to normal so badly," said Faith, "and it took me a long time to realize: Faith, you're not going to be back to normal — I was so embarrassed for the longest time [because before] I was such an independent person. I went from being a 17-year-old to literally a child again, relearning everything and learning a new way of life. That is what living with a brain injury is, learning a new way of life."

A turning point occurred when Faith attended a MADD conference and found similar-

ties between her and a speaker at the gathering, who also had a brain injury. The young man, who stuttered frequently and admitted during the speech that he had a tendency to forget what he was going to say, likened the experience of living with a brain injury to the image of ducks swimming—all people saw was how smoothly the ducks were gliding across the water, but no one realized how hard their feet were working under the surface to keep them afloat.

To Faith, this was exactly how she felt every day. The invisibility of brain injuries, and the complex challenges of their recovery, are the issues that the Flagg family wishes to draw attention to. Since the nature of a brain injury is not only internal, but also psychological, it is common for people who don't know Faith to make false assumptions about her personality.

"A brain injury is an invisible injury," said Sharon. "People can be mean when they don't understand."

She described days where she

would take Faith out shopping and experience ignorance, or impatience from others, because Faith needed extra time to complete basic tasks like counting change, or she would sense judgment from onlookers when Faith needed to stop and rest, or needed special accommodations.

Over the years, Sharon and Faith would try to educate others on an individual basis about brain injuries, but as Faith began making more progress in her recovery, she began to think about how she could help on a larger scale.

Faith hopes to do public speaking once the pandemic is over, and the family is planning to write a book or film a documentary about her experiences. She has been contacted by a member of the Canadian military and asked for permission to share her story to bring awareness to brain injuries and PTSD. Eventually she hopes to build an animal sanctuary called, "Keep the Faith," to provide a space where people can go to feel safe and protected.

On her Instagram page (www.instagram.com/keepthefaitco), Faith sells necklaces and resin trinket dishes that she has created. Fifty percent of all proceeds are donated to MADD or brain injury awareness.

To Faith, it is important for her to try to give back to a community that has helped her and the Flagg family so much. In particular, she wants to be a voice for her specific age group, with a focus on connecting brain injury awareness with mental health issues. She believes that if her story can help even one person with brain injuries, or to convince one person to take a cab home instead of drinking and driving, then she will have done some good.

"This happened to me, and I want it to be remembered. But I also want to use it for good. I want to be a voice for people with brain injuries, to help people with brain injuries. A voice of hope, a voice of faith."

A particularly loud snore from one of the newborn puppies interrupted the conversation, and Faith and her mother laughed through their tears. They embraced on the sofa.

"I cracked," said Faith, as she squeezed her mother's hand, "but I didn't break." ♦

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