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Community

Young skier overcomes horrific accident

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Eleven-year-old Tessa Stretch is a beautiful, shy, extraordinary student who attends Dr. Gordon Townsend School.

On the outside Tessa looks like any other regular girl, who faces any other adolescent problems, but not only does Tessa face average problems with courage and a smile but she has overcome so much more.

This past February, Tessa, a former avid downhill skier, experienced a horrific skiing accident in which she suffered a serious brain injury.

"Obviously, we were devastated when this happened," said Tessa's mom Barb Stretch.

"We went through a natural progression of emotions 'Why us?' 'What could we have done to prevent this?'"

Tessa collided with another skier and was sent flying head-first into a ski-lift tower. Tessa had to be air-lifted to the Alberta Children's Hospital by STARS air ambulance and although she was wearing a helmet, doctors had little hope that Tessa would survive her injuries.

"When we heard the damage was extensive we took the attitude that the worst thing imaginable did not happen; Tessa lived so things will only get better from here, and we will be happy with whatever recovery she achieves."

Tessa miraculously started to show signs of recovery very soon, much faster than doctors had seen before and on April 10, 2007 Tessa was released from the hospital and started attending Dr. Gordon Townsend school April 17.

Brant Parker, principal of Dr. Gordon Townsend School, said "Our mission here is to provide the best possible educational and emotional support for our students and prepare them to successfully re-enter their community schools as soon as possible."

Students who attend Dr. Gordon Townsend School need rehabilitation, are handicapped, or have eating disorders. Some are in the inpatient program, and some are in the outpatient program, but what they all have in common is the desire to learn. Rae Miller, Tessa's teacher at Dr. Townsend, said, "She has made such amazing progress, and is a role model and leader in the classroom."

Prior to the beginning of this school year Tessa's main focus was recuperating. Since September, however, Tessa has begun refocusing on her academics as well as multiple types of weekly therapy.

Doctors predicted that Tessa would have very little quality of life after her accident, saying that it was unlikely that Tessa would walk, talk or be able to communicate. Now she has overcome all odds and with the help of ongoing therapy is making astounding progress.

Tessa has physiotherapy sessions in which she focuses on muscle movement and being active. The sessions include activities such as swimming once a week, stretching, and running on the treadmill.

Three times a week Tessa also has speech and language therapy in which she is focusing on correcting a small speech impediment she has due to the accident.

Tessa speaks very slowly and sometimes has to concentrate on words and forming sentences. Her therapy focuses on increasing the rate of her speech by getting her to speak into a machine which gives her feedback on the rate of her speech.

Other types of therapy include occupational therapy, music therapy and pet therapy.



Tessa Stretch, a student at Dr. Gordon Townsend School in the Alberta Children's Hospital, survived a devastating skiing accident last February.

photo: Photo: Erin Peterson/Calgary Journal

Academic subjects Tessa participates in include, math, language arts and social studies, in which she is following the current municipal election.

"My favorite subject is art," Tessa said, while showing off

a handmade pencil holder. Tessa also admits she has multiple

sketchbooks and said, "My favorite things to sketch

are fashion designs or people."

According to Tessa's family, her teams plan to transition her back to her community school, Chinook Park Elementary, in mid-November on a part-time basis, then attend the school full-time starting beginning of December.

Even then, she will continue to take therapy as an outpatient a couple times per week.

Steven Greene, a spunky and energetic Grade 10 student at the school, who is confined to a wheelchair but declined to elaborate why, said the thing he wants most is "respect."

"I want people to look at me, not the fact that I'm in a wheelchair, because I don't even notice that I am," he said. Parker said, "All of our students are amazing kids. While we hate to say goodbye, our real purpose is tied to fostering student learning while students health needs are being met here at the Alberta Children's Hospital, and then we work to assist each child in the process of transitioning from Dr. Gordon Townsend to wherever their home school might happen to be."

Founded in 1962 as the Children's Hospital school, it was renamed in 1977 after Dr. Gordon Townsend, a pediatric surgeon who believed in the importance of providing an education to those students unable to attend regular school and has been taking attendance under that name ever since.