

'Hand of God' wakes brain-injured girl from coma

In the fall of 2011, Taylor Hale fell off the hood of her friends car and hit her head, she went in to a coma. Doctors she would never wake up but after prayers from a local chiropractor she miraculously woke up. Kelsey Kremer/The Register

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WAUKEE, Iowa -- The family of Taylor Hale gathered in her hospital room nearly four years ago. They assembled to say goodbye.

The date was Sept. 17, 2011 — six days after what normally would have been a silly teenage moment spawned a terrible sequence of events that resulted in two parents preparing to say goodbye to their 14-year-old daughter.

Taylor was at a friend's house on Sept. 11 after the first Waukee High School football game. A friend was leaving, and Taylor and another friend teased him.

"There's been an accident," Stacy remembered Taylor's friend saying. "An ambulance is on the way."

Stacy was still in the fog of sleep when she got the call. First, she was nervous. Later, she was terrified. The accident left Taylor with a traumatic brain injury.

Taylor was put into a medically induced coma in hopes it would help her heal. But the prognosis was poor.

Taylor remained unresponsive for a week. Then, in the early morning hours of Sept. 17, she suffered a brain hemorrhage.

Doctors and nurses fought to save Taylor's life. But at the end of a grueling session, Taylor's brain sank part way into her spinal canal.

No one comes back from that, the doctors told Taylor's mother, Stacy, and her father, Chuck Hale.

Nothing more could be done. Their daughter was brain dead. It was time to make arrangements to take her off life support and discuss organ donation.

That afternoon, Jeff Stickel, a chiropractor and friend of Taylor's parents visited the hospital. Stickel had wanted to come for some time.

He felt God was calling him to treat Taylor. Stacy and Chuck figured he was too late.

"Have you ever worked on an unconscious person before?" Chuck said.

Stickel had not.

"Well, I'm not for it," Chuck said.

Stacy, too, thought it was a bad idea.

Stickel, who runs Adio Chiropractic on Ingersoll Avenue in Des Moines, understood. He asked if he could pray with the family.

They agreed. He put his hands on her neck and prayed for God to heal Taylor.

The family thanked Stickel. He left.

Later that afternoon, doctors turned off the life support that had been helping her breath since the accident.

And then, something unexpected happened: Taylor struggled to take a breath under her own power.

They reconnected life support. As the day went on, Taylor's brain activity began to increase. Her eyes fluttered. She made mumbling noises, trying to talk.

And finally, Taylor Hale, considered brain dead by science, awoke from her coma.

"It was the hand of God at work," Chuck said. "That's the only thing that can explain it."

Their flicker of hope became a raging fire. They went from planning funeral arrangements to thinking about rehab.

First at Blank and later at Mercy Healthy Living Center YMCA in Clive, Taylor relearned just about everything, from swallowing food to talking and walking.

Progress was slow, but steady — excellent for a girl once assumed brain dead.

She went from a wheelchair to a walker — then walking by herself.

She missed most of her freshman year in the Waukee school district. A tutor helped her keep up with her class, which frustrated Taylor.

"I was angry because I used to be able to do this stuff by myself, and now I couldn't," Taylor said.

Taylor Hale, 18 of Waukee is reunited with Dr. Jeff Stickel, of Adio Chiropractic Clinic, on Tuesday, May 12, 2015, for the first time since Stickel met with Hale in the hospital hours before her miraculous recovery from a coma caused by her brain swelling after falling off the hood of a car in 2011. Stickel laid his hands on her neck and prayed for her while she was in the hospital. (Photo: Kelsey Kremer/The Register)

School became tougher. The strain on her cognitive ability after the injury meant she wouldn't be able to learn a new language as she planned. Math was harder.

Studying for big tests caused intense anxiety. She always had a little anxiety before, but now it was more potent.

But Taylor, in the parlance of Charles Portis, is a woman of true grit.

She learned to accept tutors and specialized learning plans. She had to work harder because she was behind, and the work did not come as easily.

But she persevered. She kept up with her class. And she will graduate from Waukee next week.

Taylor doesn't spend a lot of time looking back. In part because she can't.

One of the major consequences of the accident is she lost her sense of smell and a lot of her long-term memory.

Her first time swimming? Gone. Going to the zoo? Lost.

"I don't remember my childhood," Taylor said. "I look at my pictures, and I recognize that's me, but I don't remember anything."

Once in a while, she'll have flashes of her past.

She saw a picture the other day. She asked her mom if it was outside the green house they used to live in. It was.

"I could remember the layout of the living room, but that was it," she said. "I couldn't remember what the picture was taken for."

She struggles with short-term memory. She'll make a phone call at 11 a.m. Three hours later, she'll forget it ever happened.

But if the call is mentioned the next day, she'll remember it.

There was another change after the accident. Taylor lost all her friends from the accident. She doesn't know why.

"None of them talk to me anymore," she said.

The pain and loneliness in her voice is obvious. She's taken such a long journey.

Her family was with her all the way. But for whatever reasons, perhaps the fickle attitudes and short-sightedness typical among teenagers, her peers were not.

Stacy said her daughter seems less outgoing, more introverted than she was before the accident.

Taylor said she doesn't remember.

"I have nothing to compare it to," she said. "Maybe I'll be more like the person people remember me as down the road, but this is who I am now."

And what a fine thing that is to be.

The girl who was declared brain dead. She walks. She talks. She drives — which terrifies her mom, of course.

She is Taylor Hale, 17 years old. The girl who beat death.

How did it happen?

The doctors said nobody comes back from the hemorrhage she had. Yet here she is.

Was it Stickel's healing touch moments before Taylor began to wake up? Or was that a coincidence?

Taylor and her parents all use the same phrase to describe her recovery: "The hand of God."

That's good enough for Taylor.

"God can save people," she said. "I'm always thankful to all the doctors and nurses and therapists who helped me get better, but God did most of the saving."

Taylor's miraculous recovery will always be a part of her story, but she's going to make sure it isn't the only story she has to tell. She's interested in event planning as a career.

Isn't that perfect? Taylor may not be able to remember life before the accident, but now she's at the stage in life when many young people get to reinvent themselves and discover who they truly are and what they want to be.

The friends who ignored her after the accident? They're in the rear-view mirror.

And Taylor doesn't spend a lot of time looking back. There's no point in it. She's headed forward toward new friends and new adventures.

She knows college will be a challenge after her brain injury. She's undaunted.

"I'm not a person who is going to quit because I can't do something," Taylor said. "I don't give up."