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DeSoto High football player paralyzed during practice maintains his strength

"I know I'm going to walk again. ... That's why I have a smile on my face every day."

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By **BRIAN DAVIS** / The Dallas Morning News
brdavis@dallasnews.com

DESOTO – Charlotte Borner remembers how May 6 started just like any other day.

Her son Corey headed out for another day at DeSoto High School. She promised to call him to make sure he had a ride home from football practice.

"I never imagined that you would never see him be able to walk through that door again," Charlotte Borner said.

Corey's life was forever changed that afternoon.

He was paralyzed from the neck down while making a tackle during spring practice. The 16-year-old sophomore was rushed to the hospital, underwent eight hours of surgery, then spent 11 days in intensive care and almost six weeks in rehabilitation.

Corey left Room 415 at Baylor Institute for Rehabilitation around 10:30 a.m. Tuesday and headed home. Only this time, Corey's father had to unhook the storm door so two Baylor assistants could lift Corey over a small step and get his motorized wheelchair through the front door.

Corey then did what most teenagers do. He parked in front of the TV and got something to eat.

He still can't move his lower body, but he can raise his arms enough to put on a shirt and a baseball hat. Corey is using a pencil to operate his cellphone, and while he can't shake your hand, he can, as DeSoto football coach Claude Mathis said, "Give you some dap."

"I know I'm going to walk again," Corey said in his first interview since the accident. "I don't let it get to me. I'm real determined. That's why I have a smile on my face every day."

It's that attitude that captivated Corey's doctors, physical therapists and an army of visitors, including former Cowboy Terrell Owens, University of Texas football coach Mack Brown and state Attorney General Greg Abbott, who's partially paralyzed.

Word about Corey spread quickly. He received something from Texas A&M, Baylor, Nebraska, Army and the Vanderbilt basketball team, and even got a jacket from the Los Angeles Lakers.

People may have heard about Corey after visiting Rich Behm, the Cowboys scouting assistant who was paralyzed from the waist down when the team's practice facility collapsed. "He was in Room 400," Charlotte Borner said.

Owens and Buffalo Bills teammate Donte Whitner brought an entourage up to the fourth floor and took over the family room at Baylor. They gave Corey autographed jerseys, a signed NFL game ball and a framed picture.

Brown gave Corey his watch, along with an autographed UT hat. The coach told Corey that the next time he calls, Corey had better be able to lift his arms and see what time it is.

"One thing I learned from spending time with him is that he is a kid that will never give up," Brown said. "He's a very courageous and tough young man."

Unplugged limbs

DeSoto coaches have said Corey's injury was a freak accident.

"I just remember the receiver ran a bubble route, and I was backpedaling," said Corey, a defensive back on the junior varsity. "My head hit his stomach and he flipped. The ball came out, and my body just fell on the ground so slowly. After that, I just couldn't get up."

A day later, doctors at Parkland Memorial Hospital fused his C5 and C6 vertebrae and relieved the pressure the C6 vertebrae was putting on his spinal cord. The two procedures took about eight hours.

"There's nothing wrong with his arms and legs, but right now, they're not really plugged in," said Dr. Lance Bruce, who oversaw Corey's rehabilitation. "What we would hope is that over time, there will be some recovery and function."

In rehabilitation, occupational therapist Leslie Cunningham helped Corey learn how to do normal tasks again, such as getting showered and dressed. Physical therapist Amy Boulton taught Corey how to keep the muscles and joints loose and how to operate his wheelchair.

Why me? Not Corey

When he wanted free time and fresh air, Corey wheeled himself outside to sit by a rock overlooking Gaston Avenue.

He had plenty of time to ponder a logical question: Why me?

Corey said he prays every day, and his family has long attended Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church, right up Washington Avenue from Baylor Institute for Rehabilitation. The church is planning Corey Borner Day for July 26.

"You've just got to live on, really. Don't give up," said Corey, the youngest of three brothers. "That's it. Just live one day at a time."

Corey still has big dreams. He wants to study broadcasting in college and maybe become a radio disc jockey.

Michael Borner said he asked himself how this could happen to his son – once.

"I spoke with my son about it, and he said it wasn't his fault, my fault or his mother's fault," Michael said. "That was an accident. After he told me that, I left it alone. When he told me that, it made sense."

Charlotte Borner said: "My spirit, my faith in God is strong. But you find yourself questioning things sometimes, and then you have to sit back and look at the overall picture, that things happen for a reason. God doesn't make any mistakes."

"With my faith in God and Corey's faith, I know it's going to be OK."

Making renovations

Now that Corey's back home, his parents are coming to grips with their new economic challenges.

Charlotte Borner works in the business office at Baylor University Medical Center. Michael Borner is an office manager at a Dallas law firm. They live in a two-story house close to the high school.

The Borners must redesign their home so Corey can move around. His room upstairs is no longer an option. Corey will most likely move downstairs, and three walls might get knocked down and the bathroom redone. The first contractor estimated the job at \$16,000.

The family hasn't looked into buying a van that can carry a wheelchair. But they heard that may cost \$50,000.

Abbott said that based on what he knows about the Borners, they will persevere.

"Almost everyone who faces these kinds of challenges, they dig into a reserve that's prevalent in almost all of human nature," he said. "That allows them to find the strength to prevail over conditions that life presents."

HOW TO HELP: MAKE A DONATION

Gridiron Heroes, a nonprofit organization that helps athletes recover from spinal cord injuries, estimates that families need upward of \$500,000 for the first 100 days of medical care.

The Borners have established a trust fund at Bank of DeSoto, 2011 N. Hampton Road.