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'I can still hold his hand'

Dylan's parents struggle to hold on to their son's memory

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BY DENISE CROSBY Beacon News

It's been more than a day since I came back from visiting Dylan's parents, and I can't stop thinking about his little hand. Actually, it's a replica, made in the hospital after doctors told Dan and Lisa Richardson their 7-year-old son -- injured in a car accident two days before -- was brain dead. A replica made not long before his parents watched his body wheeled to surgery, where his organs would be removed so other children could live.

"She knows it was an accident. And she's had a lot of support from so many people," Dan Richardson said when his wife slipped from the room to gather pictures of Dylan. "But she is really struggling."

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Dan Richardson holds a cast of the right hand of his son Dylan.

(Heather Eidson/Beacon News)

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Dylan Richardson.

(Courtesy)

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The collision was one of those accidents that could have happened to any of us. Driving home after a trip to the grocery store about 5:30 p.m. July 11, the light turned yellow as Lisa was waiting to make a left turn onto Sullivan Road from Orchard Road.

Dylan, buckled up in the back seat, was munching on a bag of Smarties that had been his reward for shopping with Mom. There were other cars making the left turn from the opposite direction. She didn't see the one coming through the intersection. When the 16-year-old driver hit her car broadside, both vehicles flipped and groceries scattered everywhere.

But not before Dylan took the brunt of the impact.

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Lisa Richardson, bruised and wearing a neck brace, remembered the police coming to Provena Mercy Medical Center and reading a "bunch of words from a paper" before handing her a couple of tickets: failure to yield while turning left, failure to show proof of insurance (she was unable to get the paperwork out of the crushed vehicle).

The family didn't fault officers for doing their job, but they wondered why they had to show up at the hospital to issue citations to an injured woman whose son was being airlifted to a trauma hospital. (They found out later police are required by law to read a lengthy traffic accident warning to motorists involved in a serious crash.)

Lisa didn't hear a word they said anyway.

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As the Richardsons' large family -- including Dylan's two teenage brothers, Nick and Bryan; grandparents; aunts; uncles and cousins -- waited at the hospital, hope reigned supreme. Dan focused on the hours of rehab it might take to get their little guy reading and writing and speaking again, while Lisa envisioned Dylan recuperating from his broken right femur on the living-room sofa -- watching TV and playing video games while she waited on him hand and foot.

Dan and Lisa never stopped wishing for a miracle throughout that long, sleepless night, even while they stared at the gauge that recorded Dylan's cranial pressure climbing higher and higher. And then, the next morning, that gauge dramatically plummeted.

Dan knew what that meant: Blood had stopped flowing to his son's brain.

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The first time Melissa Johnson Williams, the soft-spoken representative from Gift of Hope, approached them, the family was not ready to talk about donating Dylan's organs. On Friday morning, however, Dan and Lisa saw for themselves the dark, empty spot on the X-ray. In spite of all the tubes and drugs and prayers, their youngest child's brain was dead -- and so was all hope.

At 12:40 p.m. Friday, July 13, a doctor looked at his watch and made it official. A few hours later, his parents signed the donor consent form. Gift of Hope could take his heart, his liver, kidneys, lungs, corneas. But Lisa wouldn't give up Dylan's beautiful hazel eyes.

"I didn't want to walk down the street," she said, "and know I could see his eyes in another child ..."

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The replica of the hand will go into the display cabinet in the dining room of the family's home, next to the urn that will hold the little boy's remains. After discussing it as a family, the Richardsons decided against burying his cremated remains in a cemetery.

"We wanted him home, with us," Lisa said. "This feels right."

Now, more than ever, so also does their decision to donate his organs. Dylan's heart went to a child in South Carolina; his liver stayed in Chicago; his pancreas went to Indiana; his kidneys to St. Louis. When filling out the consent form, the Richardsons readily checked the box that will allow them someday to find out who those children are -- perhaps even meet them.

The reality of their loss, the Richardsons agreed, has yet to set in. But even as they work through the grief, it helps, Dan said, knowing his son "will live on in so many ways."