

MORGAN HILL TIMES

Survivor

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By Marilyn Dubil (marilynd@morganhilltimes.com)

Hugs, squeals of joy and lots of laughter filled the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center burn unit as former patient Dave McNabb, who holds the record for length of stay in the burn center, made a visit with his parents last week.

After more than 17 months in the hospital's Regional Burn Center, McNabb and his parents developed relationships with the center's staff.

"It feels like a family reunion," laughed nursing supervisor Jill Sproul.

McNabb's story begins in 2002, when he was working for Fluor Corporation, a large construction and maintenance company that did maintenance work for IBM Corporation.

The 40-year-old Hollister resident who grew up in Morgan Hill, was working on electrical maintenance. He was told, he said, to take a part from an electrical box on Jan. 5, 2002. What he didn't realize was that there was power flowing through a line in the box, 12,400 volts of electricity from a high voltage transformer, which led to a 35 million watt electrical explosion in his body.

The electricity grabbed on to him, and he kicked and tried to break free, but it just pulled him "like a magnet."

"I shorted that machine out, so it blew up and when it blew up it set me on fire and threw me back 10 feet into a wall," he said. "I was still conscious, but I was on fire. I'm on fire trying to put it out."

With no one but a co-worker around at the substation, the co-worker had to put the fire out by slapping him with his hands. McNabb instructed him to get on the radio and call his boss.

He was taken to Valley Medical Center by ambulance.

From the shock he was in he couldn't feel the pain.

By the time he arrived at the hospital, the pain was horrible, he said. He was in a medically-induced coma for the first four months.

"You're just a mummy. You're wrapped completely with a couple of tubes coming out," he said.

His parents were told he had a two percent chance to live.

"I just wanted to see my son," Judy McNabb said. "When they finally let me see him, all I could see were his eyes.

The recovery process was slow and tortuous, with 50 operations, skin grafts and dealing with a variety of emotions. For Dave's family, emotions were already raw after Judy's sister was killed in a car accident in October 2001 and her nephew was dying from complications from diabetes.



Dave McNabb jokes with the staff members who cared for him for more than a year at the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center Burn Unit. From left, Fruda Chan, mother Judy McNabb, unit support assistant Rosie Jameson, medical clerk Tina Enril and physical therapist Maria Daoud.

Photo by: Lora Schraft

"My mother is such a strong person," he said. "I could never have gotten through that without her."

Dave said when he was ready to give up, his mother pushed him to keep going.

"He's my child, as a mom I had to do everything I could," she said. "Dave and I always had a close bond."

Once he left the hospital, Dave stayed with his parents for a year, with his mom acting as his nurse.

She spent hours each day just changing bandages.

"It's hard to come to terms that you're going to be that way for the rest of your life," he said. "I'm really an act of God ... One day I go from being (active) to getting hurt."

He was 34 years old at the time of the accident and he felt like he was just starting to get his life together and know what he was going to do, making good money. Then his whole life turned around.

McNabb grew up in San Martin, graduated from Live Oak High School. He enrolled in the military when he was 18. In 1998 he began working for Fluor.

After the accident, Dave said, his friends drifted away because it was painful for them to see him suffer.

"How do you look at someone who's burned 70 percent? It was hard for them," he said.

Judy said despite all he has been through, her son is not bitter. She describes him as generous and caring.

Dave donated his motorized wheelchair to a young girl in Hollister when he saw her in a store, Judy said, her mother pushing her in a non-motorized chair.

"He's a beautiful man," she said.

Richard Alexander, McNabb's attorney who helped him navigate all the medical and job issues, considers him a friend.

"He's an extremely courageous man," he said. "He came within inches of being thrown on the human scrap heap, very close, but he fought his way back."

Gale McNabb, Dave's father, said Alexander fought hard for Dave, not letting up until he got what Dave needed to pay his skyrocketing medical bills.

"It's hard to know what kind of lawyer to hire when you're in dire straits," Gale said. "Dick Alexander has been amazing. He dedicated himself to getting what was right for Dave."

Dave agrees that Alexander played a major role in his recovery.

"I have the best lawyer that you can imagine ... He still calls me to see how I'm doing. He's become a friend. He's a real great guy. I've never met anyone like him."

McNabb says he wakes up every day thanking God for another day. He's more appreciative of being able to perform small tasks for himself, as well as enjoy his hobbies, riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycle, hunting, fishing.

He feels blessed.

"I'm a lucky guy."



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