

Foundation Recipient

Melissa Underwood



Melissa Just Prior to Her Hospital Discharge

Melissa's Story

In the summer of 2014 Melissa was an energetic college student enjoying her summer. Twenty-two years old, she was looking forward to her senior year at Western Carolina University where she expected to finish her degree in Special Education/Elementary Education. Six months prior, she had posted a prophetic statement on her Facebook page which said, "Be strong because things will get better. It may be stormy now, but it never rains forever." She would soon need to take that advice to heart.

On July 12, 2014 she was paralyzed while diving into Lake Gaston.

Melissa sustained a C6 fracture and spinal cord injury when she dove into water which was either too shallow, or possibly she hit a submerged tree. Technically a quadriplegic, that meant she was paralyzed from the chest down and had almost no movement in her fingers. Her dad Steve is the owner of Heat & Air Controllers, a small HVAC contractor in Eden, North Carolina, just north of Greensboro. Along with being a licensed HVAC contractor, Steve is also a licensed general contractor in North Carolina and Virginia. Those skills would come in handy after Melissa's injury. Steve coordinated the complete upfit of the basement in their split-level house and did as much of the work as possible to keep the cost down. Despite this however, costs ran into the tens of thousands of dollars. A teacher, Melissa's mom took her remaining sick days in order to be the primary caregiver. Steve's business

was struggling through the bankruptcy of a large customer which wiped out their cash, because he elected to pay all his suppliers and subcontractors. Through it all, neither Melissa or her family lost her dream of returning to college and finishing her degree.

Like many rural towns in America, Eden rallied around the Underwood's and Melissa. Her college sorority sisters raised money through a shirt sale, and a 5K in the fall as part of Eden's Riverfest raised funds as well. This wasn't enough however to meet the needs Melissa had which were not covered by insurance. Melissa needed a shower chair, and she very much desired both a cross trainer and standing frame. She intended to use the latter two devices to both build her strength and continue her rehab in order to regain as much movement as possible. A determined young woman, Melissa had set a goal of returning to college in 2015 and finishing her degree. Melissa's family learned of the Joseph Groh foundation while conducting online research while she was at the Shephard Center in Atlanta.

Thanks to your generosity, the foundation was able to grant Melissa's request!

Melissa is now back at Western Carolina University and continues to work out on her cross trainer and standing frame, and some movement has returned to her fingers. True to her dream, she expects to finish her degree only 18 months after her life-changing injury!



Sign greeting Melissa when she returned home



Pictures depicting use of a standing frame