

Paralyzed teen works to build a new life

Paul Salter enters high school as a freshman and as a quadriplegic

August 27, 2000 - *Herald-Tribune* - Keramet A. Reiter

Paul Salter leans his head, the only part of his body he can move, against the control panels on his wheelchair to navigate around corners and through a doorway at a Sarasota rehabilitation hospital.

The 14-year-old jokes about the drag of returning to school; like other incoming freshmen, he is not looking forward to getting up every day in time for 8 a.m. classes. And he's worried about fitting in. He smiles and turns his head shyly away when his case manager mentions how long his wavy red hair has become. He wants it shaved off before anyone takes his picture, much less before any of his fellow students see it.

His grin conceals his frustration with the thousands of things he can't do since he was left paralyzed after a head-on tackle at a Pop Warner football practice last September. Every day is a struggle for **Paul**, whether he's learning to breathe without a ventilator or manipulating a mouth stick to make himself lunch.

He entered Riverview High last week not only as a freshman -- at one of the most awkward ages in life -- but as a quadriplegic. He will never be just one of the guys again, as his primary doctor, Kevin McGaharan, pointed out.

Paul will watch his classmates face all of the frustrations of a teen-ager in high school, such as "driving, relationships, sexuality," McGaharan said. Often, **Paul** will be unable to participate. As much as he tries not to, **Paul** often wakes up in the morning feeling like "I just want to do nothing."

Back to school

One of only three quadriplegics to be mainstreamed into a Sarasota County high school in 25 years, **Paul** stood out last week among his 750 freshman classmates at Riverview. There was no chance to blend in, to hide among a sea of new faces.

"He's like Christopher Reeve in high school," McGaharan said, referring to the actor who was hurt in the same fashion as **Paul** when he was thrown from a horse.

Paul rides to school as the sole passenger in an air-conditioned, lift-equipped school bus. A nurse meets him when he arrives on the Sarasota campus and follows him to each class, where he either tape-records lectures or receives copies of notes from his teachers.

Paul doesn't mind the private bus ride. "That's pretty cool, actually. It's just me that goes," he said. And he hardly seems to mind the nurse escort. "I can get around by myself, but she kind of follows," he said. He was not as upbeat, however, about getting up early and the work required to go to a new place. "Oh yeah, it's a big pain," he said.

It takes **Paul** two hours to move from bed to wheelchair, get dressed and eat breakfast, all with the help of his family and a nurse. Early for him means 6 a.m., and he still only gets to school in time for second period.

With the permission of Riverview officials, he skips a first period elective, such as speech or band, so he can arrive at Riverview later. He confided laughingly that his nurse had to prod him awake once or twice during an especially boring video on his first day of school. He didn't think his teacher noticed, but "It was embarrassing."

Paul's help at school -- the nurse, the bus and the special education teacher who will oversee his work -- is partially funded by \$20,000 a year from the state, but the school district will spend about twice that each year.

Administrators at Riverview say they will do everything they can to make **Paul** comfortable. "We're going to treat him like we do any other student," Principal Louis Robison said.

On Tuesday, **Paul** seemed excited by all the new experiences. "It was a lot better than I thought it would go," he said of his first two days of school. "I have met a couple new people." But he's not sure who his friends might turn out to be or who will accept him in a place where being cool and fitting in is essential in the minds of teen-agers.

The injury

Spinal cord injuries affect fewer than 1 percent of Americans. Of the estimated 200,000 injuries annually, about 7 percent are sports-related. "I played football from second grade through college. In all my years of football, I had seen one other neck injury," said Dave Anderson, who was coaching another team on the field the day **Paul** was injured.

After **Paul** ran head-on into a SunDevils teammate Sept. 9, he lay on the ground at Twin Lakes Park, drifting in and out of consciousness. He complained that he couldn't move. Anderson said he remembered seeing **Paul** on a stretcher, his neck in a brace, as he was wheeled to a helicopter.

"It just makes you stop," Anderson said. "The blood just runs cold, and you wonder what happens next." Neurosurgeons at All Children's Hospital melded pieces of **Paul's** pelvic bone to his spine to strengthen the two broken vertebrae in his neck and to prevent further internal injury.

After almost two months, **Paul** was moved to HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital, where he was weaned from a ventilator and therapists began building strength in his torso and stretching his limbs. He learned to use a mouth stick and to navigate his wheelchair.

He returned home in May, eight months after he was hurt, but continued to spend most of his days at HealthSouth. He kept up with his eighth-grade assignments in between at least six hours of therapy a day. This summer, he completed an Earth science class -- his first high school credit.

Anderson, a Baptist pastor who held a prayer service for **Paul** a month after the accident, said he and others have been amazed at the teen-ager's tenacity. "Since day one I was quite

inspired by his reaction to it," Anderson said. "He was quite resilient."

A day at a time

Slowly, **Paul** is learning to do small things for himself. It takes **Paul** an hour to prepare himself a plate of nachos. And he still needs someone to feed it to him.

He uses a mouth stick, a device about 8 inches long with a clamp on the end. He rotates his head to position the apparatus over a single chip. With his tongue, he depresses a lever that pinches the ends of the stick closed, then drags the clamped chip onto his plate.

Chip by chip, the pile grows. In much the same way, step by step, **Paul** must rebuild his life without the use of any of his limbs.

"Some days are better than others," he admitted.

Paul also uses the mouth stick to play cards and write. Eventually he'll be able to type with it and use a computer, which also will translate his dictation into print.

"When I get my new computer, I'll be doing video games," **Paul** said, lighting up at the thought of an additional activity on his short list of possibilities: television, movies, occasional excursions outside. He's not a big reader. Even if he were, turning pages would be a major challenge in a life where the most minor of tasks deplete his energy.

School has added to the demands. "It's a balancing and juggling act between school and therapy," McGaharan said. Instead of six hours a day of therapy, **Paul** now attends therapy three days a week after school.

Though he doesn't like the hard work that comes with rehabilitation -- therapists stretching his muscles and training him to be more independent -- he said he misses his friends at HealthSouth. Many of them were just like him. He fit in.

Support

As one of the younger patients at HealthSouth, **Paul** has become a favorite of his case therapist, Shelley Rayburn, and fellow patients. Since his parents have yet to receive the van that will allow them to transport him in his 330-pound wheelchair, Rayburn often arranges **Paul's** excursions -- to the mall, to the movies, to get that red hair cut.

She often brings her son, a junior at Riverview, and his friends along on these excursions so **Paul** can get to know fellow high school students. "It's kind of a little bit of a chance for (**Paul's** parents) to have five minutes," Rayburn said of her excursions with **Paul**.

By the time he returns home from hours of rehabilitation, **Paul** is frequently too exhausted to socialize with old friends or family -- his father, a plumber, and mother, a clerical worker; an older sister; and an older brother who also is in high school.

In the afternoon, **Paul's** mom meets him at HealthSouth and rides home with him in the transport van. At night, a nurse stays with **Paul** to turn him over every two hours and to

monitor his breathing. In the mornings, she works with him to keep range of motion in his limbs. Without the nurse, **Paul's** parents would not be able to sleep through the night.

Paul's mom, Gail **Salter**, said a few of his middle school friends have kept in touch. "They come by once in a while. They watch movies," she said. "But it's hard because **Paul** often comes home and sleeps."

The family has received a variety of help from the community to offset the huge costs of care for **Paul**. Rampart Homes is building the family a house that will be wheelchair-accessible and have voice-activated utility switches. The house is being built in stages as donations are received. The house will be put in a trust for **Paul**, so when he gets older it will be his.

"No one can be OK with a spinal-injury child," McGaharan said of **Paul's** parents. "They are acclimating to this as well as anyone could. It's a devastating injury to the patient but also to the family. Fortunately, **Paul** has had a lot of good support from community agencies."

Members of Faith Baptist Church, which hosted the prayer service, have kept in touch with **Paul** and tried to help his family. Kevin Elwood, a church member, pulled some strings to get a Dan Marino jersey for **Paul** and became friends with him during five or six visits over the past year. "He's a fighter type of a kid," Elwood said. "He likes to joke around and so forth. He likes girls, too."

But **Paul** doesn't like to talk about those interests. He's nervous about each day of school. "I'm just trying to get through it," he said of his first week at school. He added that he was just looking to get to the weekend. Just like any other teen-ager.

All content © 2000 Herald-Tribune Corp. and may not be republished without permission.