

Living proof of spirit, courage

Mark Bonokoski tells the story of Port Perry sisters paralyzed in a car crash last August

By MARK BONOKOSKI

THE GIRLS finally returned home from the movie they set out to see over eight months ago -- two young sisters, and three friends simply off to watch the Bourne Supremacy -- after oncoming headlights loomed into their lane, forcing their car into a ditch and their lives into the unfathomable. Quadriplegics both -- 19-year-old Shannon Deering, once a scholarship-quality fastball player, now in a wheelchair for life; and 16-year-old sister, Erica, a petite redhead with an infectious smile, also wheelchair-bound.

"The last thing I remember were those car lights coming towards us," Erica says. "And then waking up in hospital two weeks later and not knowing where I was, or even what had happened. Would I ever walk again? I asked.

"No, they said. At that point, all I could do was cry."

Durham Regional Police had called Tony Deering's home in Port Perry at a little past midnight on that August night last summer. His two daughters' beds were empty.

"There's been a serious accident," the cop's voice said.

By then, Erica Deering was already at Sunnybrook hospital, having been airlifted there after being flung through the sun roof of her sister Shannon's 2002 Pontiac Grand Am -- her recently acquired pride and joy, treated like a baby, washed every day -- having been pulled out of that car's centre back seatbelt by the sheer force of ramming into a country culvert.

Older sister Shannon, behind the wheel when the front tire accidentally slipped off the pavement in the swerve to dodge the oncoming car, home after attending Florida's Broward County Community College on a fastball scholarship, was en route to Sunnybrook from Oshawa General.

Both sisters were paralyzed from the neck down.

Three other kids were in the car. Alex Heroux, Amanda Davey and Ceri Boosma, all then 17.

They were the lucky ones.

In early March, the town of Port Perry got together and held a fundraiser for the Deering girls. It came in the form of a women's hockey game, one that featured Canadian Olympic women's hockey gold medalist, Cheryl Pounder. They sold ads for the program, and hyped it in the local weekly.

In the end, they packed the Scugog Arena. One of the players on the ice that day was Ceri Boosma, one of the five in Shannon Deering's car the night of the accident.

More than \$25,000 was raised.

It is Saturday in the Deering's newly rented Port Perry house. The girls are finally home. But it was a long haul.

After 10 weeks at Sunnybrook, they had to spend the next five-plus months undergoing intensive therapy at Toronto's Lynhurst Centre -- learning to get the most out of what was left, learning how to be the best quadriplegic that a quadriplegic could possibly be.

"The nurses and staff at Lynhurst were simply the best," says Shannon, the house filled with family ... their dad, Tony, mother, Deborah, their grandmother Jean, as well as a therapist or two. "They were like second moms to us.

"I don't know who was crying more when we left -- us or them. I wanted to take them all home with me."

It is a long and expensive road that lies ahead. The house Tony Deering has rented is only temporary, a stopgap until the new home is built and fitted with all that is needed to deal with his daughters' handicaps -- at a cost far beyond what a tractor-trailer mechanic can afford, especially one who had to leave his job to attend to his daughters.

"The elevator alone is \$54,000," he says. "Power wheelchairs are about \$30,000 apiece. And the list is long."

Port Perry, however, is not in this for the short term.

According to local cable-company owner Ron Compton, who spearheaded the fundraising campaign with local financial adviser Brian Callery, a business model has been built to carry on for "years and years."

"This community will be behind this family for a long, long time," says Compton, adding that all money raised goes to a trust fund administered by Port Perry lawyer Mike Fowler.

"Look, we all have children," he says. "And, God help us all when something like this happens. What these girls face will not be gone tomorrow. It's not going to go away, and neither are we."

Shannon says she has come to terms with never being able to walk again.

"When I get down on myself, I try to think back to those days in the hospital when I needed a ventilator to breathe," she says. "And I say to myself, look, I may not be able to walk, but I can breathe on my own now. I can talk and I can shop."

As for the Bourne Supremacy, well, the girls have yet to see the movie they had set out to watch eight months ago.

But they have the DVD.

"We will watch it one night soon," Shannon says. "All five who were in the car that night.

"We're all going to watch it together."

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Friends of the Deering family have set up three trust funds to assist sisters Shannon and Erica Deering in the long and expensive battle that lies ahead for both girls:

- Royal Bank of Canada. Transit No. 3962. Account No. 5081609.
- Canada Trust. Transit No. 2054. Account No. 6200205.
- Bank of Montreal. Transit No. 3941. Account No. 8103419.