

Tornado survivor powers through therapy

Peggy Hirsch has seen the movie “The Wizard of Oz” numerous times over the years. She never dreamed that one turbulent night, she would experience the famous “twister scene” firsthand.

On April 20, Peggy, a former Broken Bow first grade teacher, was visiting her friend, Don Lydic, at his parents’ ranch, northwest of Farnam, Neb. They were listening to the Nebraska baseball game on the radio when a weather alert warned of an approaching tornado 10-12 miles away. They started to head outside to the storm cellar when the house windows exploded. Don and Peggy dropped to the living room floor as the house disintegrated around them. “I don’t remember anything after all that glass flying,” Peggy recalled. Both of them were thrown approximately 50 feet with Peggy landing in some tree debris, her back shoved against an oil barrel from the F3 (classified “strong” on Fujita scale) tornado.

Don escaped with cuts, bruises and some stitches; Peggy wasn’t as fortunate. She sustained a collapsed lung, broken pelvis and two ribs, plus three broken vertebrae—two at her waist (L1 and T12), and one at her neck (C1). Peggy was stabilized at Gothenburg Memorial Hospital and then life-flighted to Good Samaritan Hospital in Kearney. She underwent two surgeries in Kearney to repair her spine. Bone from her fibia was used to fuse her spine and she was fitted with a halo brace to immobilize her head for approximately three months.

Peggy’s family, including daughter Heather Hirsch, from Dallas, Texas, was looking into rehabilitation care for Peggy and came to tour Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital. “We’d heard of Madonna’s excellent reputation. Lisa Franklin, (Madonna case manager) answered every question we fired off and we decided Madonna was the best place for Mom to get the therapy she needed,” Heather said.

After her admission on May 23, Peggy’s number one goal was to walk on her own again. Kathy Malcolm, Madonna inpatient physical therapist, said Peggy has done a variety of standing balance activities to decrease the use of her arms and improve her leg muscle activation during gait. These include walking with a walker and a grocery cart, going up and down stairs with railings, practicing bed mobility skills and functional transfers, and doing a variety of lower extremity strengthening exercises, including pool therapy. “Peggy is very motivated to participate in her therapy sessions and is always willing to try any therapies I propose.” Malcolm said. Peggy said the therapy schedule is rigorous and challenging. “The hardest part of therapy is trying to get my legs to obey me. It’s not a barrel of fun but I know I have to work through the pain to achieve my goal,” Peggy stated.

Working to build her endurance is another goal.



(Left to Right) Brooke Murtaugh, Madonna OT and Heather Hirsch, look on as Peggy Hirsch pedals away in therapy on the Monark UBE (Upper Body Ergonometer).

Peggy said, “I know ‘I’m making progress but others around me notice it more.” Heather commented that she left town for four days and upon returning, definitely noted the strides her mother had made.

Madonna occupational therapist Brooke Murtaugh said, “Upon admission, Peggy was very weak and couldn’t even take a hand off the mat while in a kneeling position. She’s come a long way in eight weeks.”

Her occupational therapy has varied from making toast in the Therapy Gym kitchen, to practicing gardening and doing her grocery shopping in Independence Square.

Murtaugh said, “Peggy is always in great spirits for her therapy sessions. We’re working on strengthening her core muscles for stability.”

Peggy has taken advantage of several patient services offered at Madonna including attending the educational classes for patients with spinal cord injuries. “Those classes have been very beneficial. I’ve learned quite a bit about what to expect down the road,” Peggy said. She also expressed appreciation for having a hair salon onsite for patients. Peggy and Heather are looking into staying at the family four-plex during her outpatient therapy.

Peggy’s tentative dismissal date is July 5. “I hope I’m fairly independent by then. I’ve had wonderful support from family and friends that’s been so encouraging during my recovery,” Peggy said.

Her journey back to Broken Bow wasn’t as effortless as tapping the ruby slippers together, but Peggy would agree, “There’s no place like home.”

You can view photos of the devastating tornado Peggy survived by going to www.caringbridge.org/cb/visitAPage.do and her site is peggyhirsch.com