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Girl owes every step to Medic One-trained aid workers

By Lynda V. Mapes
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Carol James and her 7-year-old daughter, Lily, were seated in the family boat on Lake Washington, talking and laughing, when in seconds, the little girl went flying.

As Lily's father, Greg, motored their power boat that July 2008 evening, a gust of wind caught a large inner tube they were towing. Lily, who was sitting in the back of the boat, became entangled in the nylon tow rope, which suddenly wrapped around her legs and feet.

Lily was pulled overboard and dragged, twirling, behind the moving boat — and then began to sink.

Realizing what had happened, Greg — a former rescue swimmer — killed the engine and dived overboard. As he brought his only daughter to the surface, he realized that the tow rope had nearly severed her left foot, and her right foot hung only by its Achilles tendon.

Carol called 911 and took the wheel to rush Lily to the dock of the nearby Mercer Island Beach Club, as her husband held Lily. That is when Lily's luck started to change.

Lily's parents say the miracle of her full recovery — today she not only plays soccer, but rides horseback, bicycles and skis — is a credit to the trauma care she received from paramedics like Phil Pierson and doctors on the scene, as well as the surgeons who would treat her.

Her parents told her story as part of a fundraising drive for the Medic One Foundation, for which Lily and Pierson will throw out the first pitch Wednesday when the Mariners play the New York Yankees at Safeco Field. A portion of the ticket proceeds for the game that night will go to the foundation.

The foundation funds training for all Medic One paramedics in King County, as well as many communities throughout the region. Unlike emergency medical technicians who provide basic life support in fire-department aid units, Medic One paramedics provide advanced life support in life-threatening emergencies.

Even before Lily and her parents reached the dock the evening of the accident, a neighbor, Michael Copass, the former director of emergency services at Harborview Medical Center, had heard the call on his scanner at home. He rushed to the dock at the beach club, got on the phone and began organizing a surgical team for Lily at Harborview.

Pierson, a Bellevue firefighter and paramedic who was on the island finishing a noncritical call, heard on his radio the report of an arterial injury in a boating accident. He jumped on the call.





The family arrived at the dock with Greg James holding his daughter, who was drifting in and out of consciousness. Several people fainted at the sight of her injuries.

" 'Daddy, don't let me die, don't let me die,' that's what she kept saying," James said, as he sat on a bench Saturday, recalling the accident. As he did, he watched Lily play soccer in the sunshine with her team, the Mercer Island Strikers.

"She was tough," Pierson said of Lily, who is now 9. He helped calm and stabilize Lily that day, and with the rest of the medic team, whisked her to Harborview.

"Guys don't do what she did," he said, remembering how she stiffened her arm and offered it to receive the IVs he administered in the ambulance. "Most guys are wimps. She was very brave."

When he asked her name, Pierson realized he was treating a little girl with the same name as his own daughter. He wondered if Lily would be a double amputee.

But doctors saved both feet with a series of more than a half-dozen surgeries. As she recovered, Lily lost half her body

weight in muscle mass. But her doctors allowed her to be at home for much of her convalescence, with near-constant care from her mother.

Her school rallied, too, with Lily's second-grade teacher even providing in-home instruction. Lily's grades never slipped.

Lily's medical call was one of about 47,000 Medic One responses in King County each year, said Jan Sprake, executive director of the Medic One Foundation. The people who responded were highly trained, in part because of the charitable giving that pays for training that voter-approved levies do not fund.

"The community, through charity, has created a model emergency system," Sprake said. Paramedics here receive more training and see more patients under the supervision of physicians than is typical elsewhere, she noted.

On Saturday, the sun danced on Lily's ponytail as she climbed on a jungle gym, kicked a soccer ball and raced across the field with her teammates.

Asked about life, she speaks not of the accident, but of her cat, Tiger, and her two pet geckos.

"I feed them crickets, worms and spiders," she reported, and added that her favorite subject in fourth grade is recess. "But I also want to learn how to read better, and learn times tables and division. I already know them, but I want to practice those."

And with that, she was off, feet in her orange shoes a blur on green grass as she played, a pressure stocking on her right leg the only outward sign of her injuries.

Her mother counts her blessings.

"I cried every day for two years," Carol James said. "You realize every second counts. We were just so lucky all the right people were there."