

Unnecessary Tragedy

On June 3, 2015 our family endured a tragedy no family should ever have to face. My son Cameron was riding his new dirt bike around our house and down an access road to the lake near our home. This road is part of our neighborhood association often used by AN, UTV's and snowmobiles. On this late spring day, unnecessary tragedy occurred when Cameron struck a chain link pulled across the access road as a direct result of someone else's negligence.

Cameron was having a great time learning to ride and shift his new bike as he had never owned one like this before. Cameron was gaining confidence as he made laps around the house and down the road. He had made approximately 4 trips down the road and back. On what was supposed to be his last pass, he headed down the road; a neighbor came along and pulled the chain across. Cameron didn't expect to see this chain as it hadn't been there and was never used, Cameron struck this chain causing a complete tracheal transection and a 75-90% esophageal tear. As a mother and nurse, the strider sound he was making as he desperately gasped for air, the blood encircling his lips and the obvious markings of a chain on his neck were traumatizing. Knowing at that moment that there was nothing I could do to help my son was by far the most debilitating emotion I have ever felt. I knew at that moment we were in a desperate race against time, Cameron needed a trauma team immediately.

Thankfully, my husband Scott and I were outside with Cameron that day, he was wearing all of the appropriate riding gear (helmet, chest protector, boots & pants) and we live within walking distance to North Country Hospital. Cameron was rushed to North Country where he was quickly intubated and mostly sedated by an amazing team of emergency department professionals. Cameron was taken to have a CT scan where we were able to discover the magnitude of his injuries. This chain had essentially annihilated his airway and esophagus. At this moment it was decided that he would be taken by DART to UVM medical center to obtain specialized care from the trauma team as well as services from the Children's Specialty center. DART was on a 2 hour delay that day for some unknown reason, we were then told we would take Newport Ambulance Services to UVM.

Once we arrived at UVM, we were met by an overwhelming amount of people in the trauma bay waiting to care for Cameron. As each provider, nurse, intern, specialist and surgeon assessed my son, each one had less hope of survival. This child essentially had no airway; it was up to the surgeon and otolaryngologist to take him to the OR and save his life. No parent should have to discuss that death is likely yet they will try their best. Cameron's life was in limbo; again, this was 100% preventable, this never should've happened.

Surgery lasted into the night and ended close to 4:00 am, Cameron survived surgery despite all odds against him. Cameron then spent 10 grueling days with a large, plastic stent in his esophagus extending all the way up to his epiglottis, on a respirator, hooked to every monitor available, they had placed a large tracheotomy and he was sedated. Cameron wasn't allowed to have anything in his mouth during this time to include ice chips. At day 10, the stent was removed, but his airway was still unstable.

Cameron had a tracheotomy that was vented, leaving him bedbound, uncomfortable, nonverbal and starving. He was also in a hard neck collar as we were unable to rule out a neck injury. Cameron was suffering with no control of his life or body. At day 17, he was able to wean off the ventilator and begin to walk and move again. He had lost 15 pounds and at 14 years old, he was 5'0 and now 79 pounds. He had to learn to walk again with the assistance of 2 people and a walker. He had a feeding tube in his stomach pumping liquid nourishment into him every hour. This was all unfair and again unnecessary. All of the nerves that control his digestion (aka vagal nerves) had been stunned and impacted by the injury so his digestion was severely hindered. Cameron's laryngeal nerves had been crushed and or severed, we still didn't know if he would ever speak again.

Cameron spent 20 days in the PICU, 20 grueling, emotional days of hell! He was finally able to move to the 5th floor to begin the process of preparing for healing, followed by discharge. We spent the next 10 days detoxing off of the several narcotics used to control pain, emotions, sleep, agitation and every other emotion a person endures post trauma. These days were awful for Cameron. Finally, 30 days following the tragic accident, we were released, Cameron could go home. This was an incredible transition for him as he now had a tracheotomy and life as he once knew it was over. We were also returning to the very place where his life was nearly cut short by an accident that never should've happened.

To this date, nearly 2 years after the accident, Cameron has undergone more surgeries and procedures than I can count to include a complete tracheal reconstruction in Cincinnati, Ohio which left him intubated with feeding tubes and hospitalized in the ICU for nearly another month. Cameron's laryngeal nerves are non-repairable leaving him with lifelong debilitating and setbacks. Although he has been fortunate enough to be decannulated (trach removed), his life is forever changed.

I came to you today to share some of the intimate details of Cameron's tragedy in hopes that each of you will reconsider bill H.287. This accident happens more frequently than any one of us want to believe or admit and it's preventable, a simple flag or marker is all we are requesting of landowners. My hope is that this emotional testimony will help each of you understand the unnecessary pain, agony and suffering this type of accident and injury cause. Our entire family has been impacted and will never be the same but most importantly, my son has been robbed of his teenage years. He has been forced to forfeit the first 2 years of high school a time when young people are trying to figure out what's next in life; my son has been fighting for his. This should have been a time when I sit in the stands at a basketball game, on the sideline at soccer or at the mountain watching him snowboard; I have sat by his bed in the hospital, holding his hand, praying he takes another breath. None of this is fair and all of this preventable. Please consider this story when you make your final decision, as a mother, I beg you to make the right decision not only for Cameron but to protect others and prevent this from happening to any other child or family. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely

Lisa M Austin (mother of a victim)