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COMMENTARY LAKE FRONT

Dinner will aid teen paralyzed in fall off horse

Lauren Ritchie
COMMENTARY

April 19, 2006

Brandi Baker knew the truth before doctors and family members gathered in her hospital room to break the news to her five days ago.

For a few minutes, everyone wept, then the 16-year-old horsewoman took their hands and consoled them.

"You'll be all right. This is going to be OK," she soothed. "This happened for a reason."

That is hard to imagine. What reason could there be for a young girl, full of life and eager for adventure, to be confined forever to a wheelchair?

Thirteen days ago, Brandi, who is president of the Sorrento Renegades 4-H club, was riding a barrel-racing horse named Mojo alone in woods off Round Lake Road. What happened is a mystery because Brandi doesn't remember the accident.

Family members only know that Mojo took the teen, who was wearing a helmet, under a tree with low branches and emerged without her. They speculated that Brandi was riding west and may not have seen the branches because she was blinded by the sun.

The Apopka High 10th-grader had a cell phone in her jeans, and she rang her father, James "Buck" Baker.

"Dad," she said. "I don't know where I am."

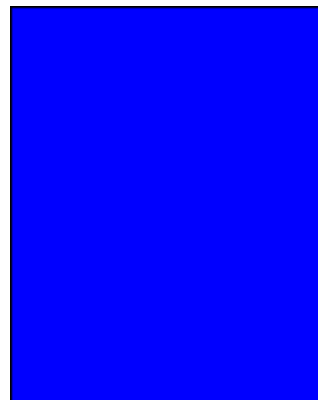
"What do you mean?" he asked her. "You only left 10 minutes ago."

"I don't know where I am," she repeated before losing consciousness.

Within minutes, several teenage boys on four-wheelers found her and called 911. They were savvy enough not to move her, said her stepmother, Stephani Caruso, 42. That may have saved Brandi's life, since her spine in X-rays resembles a fishhook, severed partway down her back and curled.

Brandi's accident was April 6, and she remains at Orlando Regional Medical Center. She's out of intensive care but is still in shaky condition. Her heart rate went wild Monday night when her lungs filled with fluid. But doctors hope to get her past it and into rehabilitation within a week. Already, she has asked to see her X-rays

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and has made some penetrating inquiries about her condition and prognosis.

Once in rehabilitation, she can make a day trip to her northwest Orange County home and see Little Bit of Rain, her Western pleasure horse, and Foxie Moxie, a Jack Russell terrier puppy her father got her after a horse kicked her at a show a few weeks ago.

But there's a problem. Neither her father's mobile home nor mother Theresa Williams' home in Apopka is wheelchair-accessible, and that's where the Brandi Baker fundraising dinner comes in.

Buck Baker, 58, who retired from 31 years with Progress Energy, has insurance that will cover many, but not all, of his daughter's expenses.

So neighbors, friends and 4-Hers are pitching in to raise cash and to build necessary items such as wheelchair ramps and a roll-in shower. The first event is a meal April 29, which will be served almost all day at a big 4-H horse show scheduled for Clarcona Horseman's Park, just south of Apopka.

Anyone who wants to skip the calories but make a contribution can send it directly to the Brandi Baker Fund, Fairwinds Credit Union, 2143 Semoran Blvd., Apopka, FL 32703. Be certain that Brandi is spelled with an I on the end because there are two funds for girls of the same name at the bank.

More information about the dinner or the fund can be obtained from Nancy Hines, whose e-mail address is snh5bar7@aol.com.

Caruso said that Brandi's outlook is "unbelievable," considering that she fully grasps her medical condition.

"I told her Friday, 'Brandi, I wish I could trade places with you.'"

And Brandi replied, "Steph, you wouldn't have made it. You're not as strong as me."

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