

A DAUGHTER'S GIFT TEEN TAKES CHARGE AFTER HER MOTHER'S DISABLING ACCIDENT

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Fifth grade had just ended, and the summer burst with the possibilities that only an 11-year-old can appreciate.

It was the last week of June 1992. Lindsey Martin and her mother looked forward to a three-week escape in the Adirondacks. Lindsey even got to bring a friend along.

Another few feet, another few seconds, and things would have turned out differently.

"I've never wished that it never happened," Lindsey says now, almost four years later. "It's going to make you a stronger person. It sounds cliched, but it's true. Even though a lot of bad things have happened, it's kind of brought my family closer together."

Lindsey's mother, Melanie Martin, was driving north on Route 28 near Otter Lake - 20 miles or so from their destination, a cozy lodge at Big Moose Lake. Lindsey and her friend sat in the back. It had been a bright, sunny day, but dusk had fallen.

Melanie didn't see the deer until it had leaped over the guardrail and into the path of her car.

On impact, the hood popped open, blocking Melanie's view. She kept the car on her half of the two-lane highway and slammed on the brakes.

Melanie's head struck the steering wheel. She got out of the car, walked to the side of the road and vomited. Lindsey and her friend were unhurt; Melanie assumed she had suffered a concussion.

Two days later, she couldn't read or remember the phone number at her office. One side of her face began to droop, and she constantly thought she smelled burning pork. She couldn't shake the feeling that something awful would happen to the two girls if she left them alone near the water.

Melanie's sisters and parents arrived and took her to a nearby hospital for tests, which indicated a severe concussion. Doctors recommended bed rest. Melanie went back to the lodge to wait it out, figuring she'd snap out of it.

Lindsey had no idea how badly her mother was hurt.

"It never came into my mind that it was a brain injury, but I knew she was acting slow," she said.

"I regret not realizing how serious it was sooner," Melanie said recently. "It would've been less painful for Lindsey."

A silent hero

Melanie Martin calls her 15-year-old daughter "a silent hero," living proof that there are plenty of good kids out there.

This is her story.

The big picture is that Lindsey's doing fine. She's a freshman honors student at Christian Brothers Academy, has a lot of friends, plays softball, sings in the chorus, belongs to the French club, volunteers with a youth group.

Her mother's worried about her.

Lindsey doesn't get enough sleep. She's lost weight. She's involved in too many activities. She's obsessed with her grades.

One morning a couple of weeks ago, for instance, Lindsey felt lousy. Melanie insisted she stay home from school. Lindsey's response? Missing a day of school could mean the difference between a 96 and a 97 in biology.

Because the accident has brought such drastic changes to their lives, Melanie said Lindsey has missed a lot of the joy of being a kid. She wishes her only child would kick back and take it easy.

"Parts of her life have been out of her control," Melanie said, "so she's tried hard to have tight control over some things, like grades and

sports."

On the day of the accident, Melanie had just received another promotion from her employer, a medical electronics and software supplier. Her last year on the job, Melanie earned \$154,000.

But in the months after the accident, it became clear that Melanie, at age 35, couldn't go back to work.

Because the frontal and temporal lobes of her brain were damaged, she lost much of her ability to read, to write, even to speak clearly. She would fall down, become depressed, cry over things that normally wouldn't bother her - all byproducts of a brain injury.

Two years ago, Melanie and her husband of 16 years separated.

Three times, Melanie became so depressed that she ended up in 4B, the psychiatric inpatient unit at University Hospital in Syracuse. Her longest stay there was five weeks.

It was at those moments that Lindsey, more than anyone else, gave her the strength to go on, Melanie said. Other family members formed a safety net that continues to this day, but it was Lindsey who pulled her through.

Melanie recalls the look of panic on Lindsey's face as her daughter stood outside the door to 4B, waiting to be buzzed in. She remembers Lindsey asking if it was OK if she didn't visit too often.

"It wasn't so much what I said, but my presence there," Lindsey says. "She felt like the rest of her life was collapsing, and I was a solid figure, that I was always going to be her daughter. She picked me as the person to get better for."

What else can a kid who's barely a teen-ager say to her mother inside 4B?

"I'd tell her nicely that she had to be strong," Lindsey said.

A lifesaver

There have been other times that Lindsey has literally saved her mother's life.

Two years ago, Melanie fell down the basement stairs carrying recyclable bottles. Blood was everywhere. Lindsey called 911, as she has done seven or eight other times. When rescue workers arrived, she calmly told them about her mother's brain injury and the kinds of medications she was on.

Lindsey does her best to shrug all this off, to look past her added responsibilities - day-to-day things like supplying a word that Melanie can't think of in conversation or navigating the vastness of the new grocery superstores for her.

"Sooner or later, everybody suffers," Lindsey said, thinking of a friend whose mom died of cancer. "I don't let it control my life."

She doesn't want anyone to think that she's the adult, her mother the child.

"We take care of each other," Lindsey said. "I may take care of my mom more than other kids do. I watch over her very closely. She's also still a good mother for me, so it's not like it's completely reversed."

Still, it's frustrating at times.

"Sometimes ... you want to say 'Snap out of it!' but that's ridiculous," she said. "You know the person can't. You have to restrain the urge to say, 'If I can deal with it, why can't you?'"

Lindsey is, after all, just 15.

She admits to a fondness for "Saturday Night Fever," the signature film of the '70s disco craze. She and her friends have a "decade fetish." They study the clothes, the music and the trends of a particular decade and do a little time-traveling.

"I don't know what we find so fascinating about it, but we just do," Lindsey says, laughing.

Amy O'Hara, a friend since first grade at Roberts Elementary School, said Lindsey has a sharp mind and a quick wit - and an ability to get really loud - that may go unnoticed behind a cool, quiet exterior.

She also marvels at Lindsey's toughness.

"I know she's a strong person, and she's obviously withstood all the pressures amazingly well for a 15-year-old, or anybody, for that matter," Amy said. "I worry about her to a certain extent. She's not always the one to come out and say she's got a problem. You have to

watch her and confront her about it."

But Lindsey has figured out what works for her.

"Sometimes I need to get out of here, even if it's just for a little while," she says in the living room of her home in the city's Strathmore section.

When that urge strikes, she loads up her backpack with 60 pounds of barbell weights wrapped in dish towels, and trudges off on hikes of an hour or more.

Lindsey sees the potential for overwrought, TV-movie-of-the-week symbolism in that, and smiles. No, she doesn't carry the weight of the world on her shoulders.

She does it to get in shape for summer wilderness excursions, to satisfy her love of the outdoors, to clear her head. Painting and writing poetry help with that, too.

"I try for nice themes, but by the end, they're so mean and dark," she said. She types her poems on a Macintosh computer in her bedroom, where the walls are covered with posters of pop music stars dead (Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison) and alive (Alanis Morissette, the Cranberries).

... You follow weakness and beauty

I stand corrected

You have become comedic actress for tragic audience

The final American clown ...

-from Lindsey Martin's poem "Withered Feminist," about the gains of the feminist movement now lost.

"In real life, I'm not an angry person," she said. "It comes out in my poetry. It's a healthy outlet."

Her aunt, an assistant professor of English at LeMoyne College, put one of Lindsey's poems up on her office wall. Lindsey wrote it after her turtle died.

"What's inspiring about her is she's sought refuge in her intellectual life, and in her artistic life," said Ann Ryan, who's Melanie's younger sister.

"It takes work to be happy, and Lindsey does it. She's had a lot of support, but she's the linchpin."

How would Lindsey describe herself?

"Ask someone else," she says, uncomfortably.

"I'd say she's part poet, part talk-show host, part philosopher, a little bit park ranger and part Lone Ranger," her aunt said. "She's lovely, she really is."

Quietly competent

Tony Martin, Lindsey's father, describes his daughter as a "quietly competent teen-ager."

"Something will happen, and Lindsey will deal with it and express herself in a very articulate manner," he said. "She has her mother's ability to get to the heart of an issue."

The Martins both attribute their separation in great part to the accident. Tony Martin said the best way to explain the breakup is that it's "somewhere between two people not knowing each other, and a weakness in dealing with a disability. My weakness, not Melanie's."

The couple went through mediation and is working toward a divorce. Lindsey says she's grown closer to her father since he moved out.

"You'd think it would be the opposite," she said.

Tony Martin shares Melanie's concern that Lindsey is pushing herself too hard. He also harbors a long-term fear.

"I'm concerned that she doesn't get a jaundiced view of family life," he said. "Good, permanent relationships are desirable, and something to search for, not to be biased against. I hope she doesn't harbor fears about personal relationships, that something can happen out of

her control to destroy it."

There have been other tragedies in Lindsey's life, her father said. An uncle was killed in a car accident. Several attempts to give Lindsey a baby brother or sister failed. Then came her mother's brain injury, and her parents' separation.

Lindsey's "quiet competence" makes her father suspect that she's internalized a lot of pain. But he sees a resilience, as well, an attitude that says, "This is tough, but I can get through it."

'I'm the mother'

A few months ago, Melanie drove Lindsey to the Landmark Theatre to buy tickets to a Natalie Merchant concert. As Lindsey went into the box office, she reminded Melanie to lock the car door so she wouldn't fall out. Melanie fired back, "The only way I'm going to fall is if I'm chasing you."

Melanie says she occasionally has to remind Lindsey, "I am the mother."

It doesn't always work. Lindsey is more than three years away from going to college, but she's already preparing Melanie for the day she won't be there.

"Even though I'm a kid, sometimes I know what's best for my mom, because I've learned a lot," Lindsey says, matter-of-factly. "She'll discuss her options for the future, and I'll give her my strong opinion."

"That's the downside of being a caregiver," Melanie said. "You're not an age, you're a caregiver."

There is irony in Melanie's sources of inspiration. It's her desire to give back some of Lindsey's childhood that pushes her to get better, yet it's Lindsey's precociousness that gives her the strength to do so.

In addition to dealing with a brain injury, Melanie has had to adjust to collecting disability insurance instead of working. It's not just a 75-percent pay cut, but the permanent loss of a career. She's also suing Volvo over its hood-latch design, and the lengthy litigation has hurt her emotionally, as well as financially.

Still, Melanie says she's in much better shape than she was 15 months ago, her last and shortest stay in 4B. It's a sentiment echoed by those closest to her.

Melanie can laugh now about saying "mules" when she means "miles," about writing words backward, mixing up the numbers on her credit card. She can still do things like drive, swim and prepare meals, but she knows she'll never be able to function at the level required to resume her career.

"She'll never be the same person she was, but she will have many of the same qualities," Ann Ryan said of her sister. "She's climbing Mt. Everest, learning skills all over again, skills that most people don't even think about, like organization.

"She's really working. She couldn't be doing any more than she's doing."

The same could be said about Lindsey. There's a downside to that, of course, but it's enabled a 15-year-old girl to save her mother's life.

"Lindsey made me believe that no one else could be her mom but me," said Melanie. "She's absolutely the reason that this isn't that bad."

• **Caption:** PHOTO Suzanne Dunn/Staff Photographer Fifteen-year-old Lindsey Martin, right, has been a great help to her mother, Melanie Martin, who suffered brain damage in a car accident four years ago. Melanie Martin credits her daughter with saving her life. "There's never been a load, never a challenge, that she hasn't said, 'Well, OK, I'm here,'" Melanie says of her daughter. Here, they share a laugh on the front porch of their Syracuse home. Color. Suzanne Dunn/Staff Photographer Lindsey Martin, 15, of Syracuse takes time to herself four or five times a week with a hike around an area park. She loads her backpack up with weights totaling 50 or 60 pounds to condition herself for wilderness excursions in the summer. Suzanne Dunn/Staff Photographer Lindsey Martin's extracurricular activities at Christian Brothers Academy include playing third base for the junior varsity softball team and helping out with a recent school play. Here she jokes around with a friend before the opening night of the play.

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