

GO  
BACK  
and Be HAPPY



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*Reclaiming Life After a Devastating Loss*

*Julie Papievis*

as told to Margaret McSweeney

MONARCH  
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And, of course, I wish to acknowledge and thank God for allowing me to ‘go back and be happy.’

## Humility

*I asked God for strength,  
that I might achieve –  
I was made weak,  
that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for help,  
that I might do greater things –  
I was given infirmity,  
that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches,  
that I might be happy –  
I was given poverty,  
that I might be wise.  
I asked for all things,  
that I might enjoy life –  
I was given life,  
that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for –  
but everything I had hoped for.  
Despite myself,  
my prayers were answered.  
I am, among all men,  
most richly blessed.*

Unknown author



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# FOREWORD

Julie Papievis is truly a miracle. During my thirty years as a neurosurgeon, I have never witnessed such a miraculous recovery as hers. On the evening that Julie was brought into Loyola University Medical Center's Trauma Unit in Maywood, Illinois, I was on call. Julie was completely unresponsive to light, sound, or touch. She had a severe brain stem injury, and her prognosis was grim.

For a doctor, one of the most difficult responsibilities is to tell a family that their loved one will either die, remain in a coma, or awaken without a functional life because of traumatic brain injuries. Someone once asked me if there is a cure for traumatic brain injuries. The answer is yes: prevention! Most traumatic brain injuries can be avoided if proper precautions are taken: drive safe, play safe, be safe.

With the severity of Julie's injuries, I did not even expect her to survive the night. I tried to prepare Julie's parents for the likelihood of her death. All that was left for anyone to do was to pray. In life's darkest moments, faith can shine like a beacon as prayer becomes a compass.

Still in a coma, Julie was transferred to a rehabilitation center. Months later, when she walked into my office, I was in complete shock. I honestly thought that she had died.

Over these past fifteen years, Julie has not ceased to amaze me. She overcame depression, ran in a 5K race only six years after her accident, participated in a triathlon and became a voice for the 'silent epidemic' of traumatic brain injury. Julie received a gift of recovery, and in return, she continues to give much of herself to others who face

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overwhelming circumstances. Her story offers hope to those without help, and she advocates for those who are disabled. I consider Julie to be not only a patient but also a lifelong friend who has made a difference in my life.

Dr John Shea, MD

Professor of Neurosurgery

Loyola University Medical Center

## CHAPTER ONE

# A WRECKED LIFE: 10 MAY 1993 AT 6:55 P.M.

Pulling her short brown hair, Toni Rapach screamed over the blaring song on the car radio, 'Honk your horn, TJ! Hurry! Honk your horn!'

The couple watched in disbelief as a large burgundy Oldsmobile Cutlass ran a red light and violently struck the driver's side of a small white Mazda sports car turning left out of a shopping mall in a Chicago suburb.

Toni jumped from her car and shouted, 'Somebody call 911!'

An older couple raced toward the accident scene. The wife shouted over to Toni, 'We're calling 911 right now on our cell phone, and my husband's a doctor!' In 1993, a mobile phone was not a common item.

Toni burst into tears when she looked into the Mazda and saw an unconscious young woman with a mane of blonde hair. She watched helplessly as the woman's head lay against the chest as if it was disconnected from her body. Toni turned around and shouted, 'Please, somebody help!' 'This poor girl and her family,' she sobbed, 'they will never be the same.'

The gathering crowd rushed to the crumpled car and tried to open the driver's door, which was streaked with burgundy paint from the Oldsmobile. The forceful impact

had left both axles broken on the Mazda. A man ran to the other side of the car and managed to climb into the tangled debris. As he reached behind to pick up the young woman's head, the doctor instructed, 'Don't move her.'

'I'm an off-duty paramedic,' the man answered in a calm and confident manner. 'I know what I'm doing.'

'Go ahead then. I'm here if you need anything.'

The paramedic happened to be a block away from the accident scene, getting his tires fixed. He lifted the woman's head from her chest and cleared the airway so oxygen could pass to the brain. At 6:57 p.m., just two minutes after the accident, firefighters and paramedics arrived in a whirl of sirens and flashing lights. Realizing the severity of the accident, Lieutenant Jim Streu radioed in a call to the station: 'Extrication equipment is needed at the scene. Send in the fire truck.'

Paramedics Greg Sauchuk and Randy Deicke leaped out of Ambulance 61. Racing to the scene with his first aid box, Greg said, 'Oh, man, this is really bad.'

They faced a 'Trauma Red' and time was a major concern. Two minutes of the 'Golden Hour' had already ticked away. Comprehensive medical treatment within that golden hour was imperative to offer any hope. Opening the first aid box, Greg removed some medical instruments to assess the woman's condition. He recognized his off-duty paramedic friend who was holding the woman's neck from the backseat of the car. Chips of sparkling glass surrounded the Mazda like Mardi Gras beads. Reaching through the blown out window, Greg said, 'Tom, how did you manage to even climb into this pretzel? Thanks for stabilizing her neck and clearing the airway.'

Greg checked the woman's breathing and said, 'Amazing. I feel a pulse. She doesn't need CPR.'

Lifting the woman's eyelids, Greg checked the pupils with a small flashlight. They didn't react. 'Pupils dilated and fixed,' Greg reported to Randy and then shouted, 'Hey, Miss! Can you hear me?'

The woman remained silent. With his large six-foot-three, 245-pound frame, Greg pressed his fist into the woman's chest. She didn't even flinch.

'Patient is unresponsive to pain with sternum rub,' Greg said. 'She scores a three.' Greg rated the woman on the Glasgow Coma Scale, a quick, practical and standardized system developed in 1975 for assessing the level of consciousness and predicting the ultimate outcome of a coma. A three was the lowest score out of a possible fifteen.

'I'll check her vitals,' Randy said as he wrapped the vinyl cuff around the woman's arm to check for blood pressure. He placed the stethoscope on the inner arm and pumped the rubber ball. No reading. He tried again. 'I can't even hear the blood flow,' Randy said, and shook his head while placing his fingertips on the woman's artery to check for a pulse. 'Patient's palpable blood pressure is only eighty. Not good. Looks like a traumatic brain injury. Probably brain stem. Elevated heart rate is 120. This is bad, guys. She's in shock. Possible internal damage. After this car door is off, let's do a "scoop and run".'

Within a minute, the fire truck arrived with the 'jaws of life' equipment. Al Green, another paramedic, was also on the truck along with firefighter Tony Pascolla. Tony lifted the forty-pound Hurst equipment and steadied the hydraulic spreader as he ripped the car door from its hinges. 'I'll be done in two minutes,' Tony shouted over the loud noise.

The paramedics decided against calling a helicopter since time was essential. Because of the severity of her injuries, they agreed to take the woman to a Level I Trauma Center

instead of the nearest hospital. Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Illinois, was fourteen miles away. They knew that neurosurgeon Dr John Shea was her only hope. The ambulance left the scene at 7:12 p.m. and arrived at 7:25 p.m. Randy, Greg and Al pulled the stretcher out of the ambulance and ran into the emergency entrance to hand the woman over to the trauma team. 'She's posturing!' Randy said. They watched as the woman started extending her arms and legs in primitive reflexes, a sign that her body could not regulate itself. She then urinated all of the water from her body, soaking the stretcher, and started agonal breathing, the last breaths taken before dying.

As Greg walked back with Randy and Al toward the ambulance, he glanced over his shoulder at the lifeless body being carted away by the trauma team. 'Dear God,' he prayed, 'Please help her through this. Just help her through this.' He climbed into the driver's seat and left the hospital. He'd seen it before. He knew firsthand that traumatic brain injury is the number one killer of people forty-four years old and younger.