Five years later, Southbridge drunken driving victim struggles for normalcy

Justine Aragona, center, with her stepfather, Daniel A. Pellegrini Sr., and her mother, Linda M. Pellegrini, during an emotional discussion about Justine's recovery from a car accident that left her with a severe head injury. (T&G Staff/JIM COLLINS)

By Brian Lee TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

SOUTHBRIDGE — Daniel A. Pellegrini Sr. wondered how his stepdaughter, Justine Aragona, is still able to brighten the mood after a 2007 car accident nearly claimed her life and left her with a severe head injury.

Justine, who doesn't remember the drunken-driving accident, asked what's changed.

Mr. Pellegrini worked his way through a box of tissues and cried as he spoke about what could have been for the now 21-year-old former honor student.
“Throughout all this, she smiled,” added her biological father, Joseph D. Aragona Jr., in a phone interview.

The family continues to talk about the accident — though memories of it are still painful — to promote awareness of brain injuries. They denounce drunken driving, advise people to watch with whom they get into a car and to wear seatbelts — and helmets while on bikes or skates.

According to the National Center on Caregiving, about 2 million head injuries of all types occur each year in the United States, including 99,000 resulting in a lasting disability, and 56,000 deaths each year as a result of traumatic brain injury.

Mr. Pellegrini brings Justine with him when he speaks on behalf of the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. It’s to show her amazing recovery and provide hope to others.

Then 16, and with hopes of becoming a lawyer, Justine was a rear-seat passenger in the April 29, 2007, accident. She and a friend copped a ride to get to a party Justine’s parents say she hadn’t received permission to attend.

Justine barely knew Joshua Smith of Wales, the driver. She and four others had crowded into his small Nissan 240SX, which slammed into a tree on Haynes Hill Road in Brimfield. Firefighters used an extrication tool and spent about 30 minutes working to free the occupants.

Justine’s injuries were most severe. She spent 48 days in intensive care. Her mother, Linda M. Pellegrini, literally moved in, never leaving her side. For 22 of those days Justine was in an induced coma.

A section of Justine’s brain was removed, refrigerated and pieced back on by the surgeon who saved her life.

“That must have hurt,” Justine said as the family gathered in the dining room.

Justine no longer has left peripheral vision and her short-term memory suffers. Hours after dinner, she often forgets what she ate. When they go to a restaurant, Mr. Pellegrini said, he stops at the entrance and reminds Justine that this is where she will have to leave, and tells her to notice things on her way in.

“Every time she goes (out) through the opposite door,” he said.

Her biggest struggles are her lost sense of time, organization and perception, the family said.
Her mother said the doctors told the family the part of Justine's brain that deals with reasoning will continue to develop until about age 26, which gives them all hope.

The accident also left Justine with a fractured C-1 vertebrae, which could have resulted in permanent paralysis had it broken the other way. She was not able to move for six months. Her broken left hip was eventually replaced.

It took her 100 days to talk and four months to swallow, the family said.

Justine's appearance has since improved. The 100-staple scar atop her head is hidden by hair.

On the night of the accident, Mrs. Pellegrini said, a nurse told her to grieve because Justine will never be the daughter she had.

“Here I am looking at my daughter and she's all tubes and wires and beeping and black and blue and blood and all kind of things going on. I'm not ready to do that.”

Before the accident, Justine dreamed of attending Harvard University and becoming a lawyer. She still wants to go to college, but now the family just wants her to find her calling in life, gain independence and develop friendships.

Her old friends visited her in the hospital, but after the apparent seriousness of the accident set in, they disappeared, the family said.

Justine attends the Center of Hope Foundation, which provides services to people with developmental problems. She volunteers at Harrington Hospital, setting up things for patients.

Mr. Pellegrini said the family will send her to an art class to rekindle an interest she had in drawing when she was younger.

The great care Justine received at UMass Memorial Medical Center — University Campus in Worcester was equaled by the tutoring at Tantasqua Regional High School in Sturbridge, the family said.

Justine, who had to repeat a grade, passed the MCAS after the accident. Mrs. Pellegrini said it took a lot of work developing learning strategies. Unable to see to her left, they used rulers, highlighters, reduced content on pages and made print bigger and with more spaces.

Justine won a gold medal in volleyball at the Special Olympics at Harvard University on Father's Day. Mr. Pellegrini said it made for an extra special Father's Day.
Her biological father, Mr. Aragona, said it brought him to tears.

Justine's teenage brothers Joseph and Jacob were robbed of the leader of the home, the family said.

Mrs. Pellegrini said Justine would review their list of chores, and if the boys hadn't held up their end, she would put them in a headlock.

Joseph said his sister's condition is a constant reminder about what can happen on a night out.

“I look at the kids at my school — it's all around me, partying and stuff,” he said. “I stay away from it all. I look at her, and that's my wakeup call right there.”

After serving more than three years in jail for drunken driving and causing serious injury, Mr. Smith was recently paroled. He apologized to the Pellegrinis and Justine's father during the parole hearing.

Mr. Aragona, who lives in Lynn, said he has finally been able to forgive the driver and even pray for him.

“If he hasn't learned anything out of this, then he's going to do it again and this time he might either get killed or kill somebody else,” Mr. Aragona said.

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