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Clackamas Community College, Oregon City, OR

Wednesday, May 11, 2011

Volume 44, Issue 21



The Clackamas Print

First copy FREE; additional copies 1¢

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Former volleyball player speaks about life after her dreadful accident

By Kayla Callaway
Co-Editor-in-Chief

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen ..." — Hebrews 11:1

These were the last words Richelle Heacock posted on her Facebook before leaving on the night of Jan. 4, 2010, the night Richelle was in a life-altering car accident that left her paralyzed from the chest down.

Now, more than year later, Richelle is still confined to a wheelchair. She has regained some movement in her hands, enough to surf the Web and text, and in her opinion acupuncture has helped her to bend her knee. Richelle has come leaps and bounds since January 2010, but still, the former star volleyball player has a long journey to travel.

Nearly every day, she has some form of physical therapy or a doctor appointment. On her days off, she constantly has visitors. At 21 years old, Richelle has had to go through more than most individuals do in their lifetime, and she keeps moving forward. She's even coaching volleyball in her spare time.

After the accident, Richelle moved back to her parents' house, leaving her Oregon City apartment that she lived in while attending Clackamas Community College.

Tucked away near the base of Mt. Rainier in a small town called Ashford sits the Heacock house. Since the accident, the house has nearly doubled in size with the addition of an apartment just for Richelle. Pulling into the driveway, one can see the expansive property behind the beautifully remodeled front entranceway. Seeing all this, it's hard to believe that the remodel took only eight weeks to complete, but then again, more than 200 volunteers showed up in the family's time of need.

Richelle's parents, Peg and John Heacock, have lived in the small community for most, if not all, of their lives, so last year when tragedy struck, everyone came together to make the Heacock house accessible for Richelle's homecoming.

"At the most tragic time of your life, your heart was just melting, crushed, and at the same time, they've got all this wonderful stuff going on and these people are just ... they're just breaking out everything to help you," said Peg, recalling how the tiny community came through.

Upon entering her apartment, I was greeted by Richelle and her mother, Peg, both women smiling warmly. Richelle, maneuvering her wheelchair with ease, showed us her living area, complete with a little kitchen stocked full of her favorite snacks and sodas. In one corner, she has some of her therapy equipment set up. When she uses the bicycle-like machine which moves her legs as if she were riding a bike, a computer sends information about her muscles' reactions to Harborview, the hospital at which she stayed after the accident.

Along another wall, near her television, her movie collection is tucked somewhat chaotically in a tall shelf and is so large it can make anyone envious. Movies like "P.S. I Love You" and "Eat, Pray, Love" adorn the shelf, although the latter is definitely not Richelle's favorite. There are five large televisions throughout the house to watch these movies on.

Richelle isn't that much different from any other girl her age. She goes to concerts, she reads books on her iPad and she is a huge fan of Facebook. She's constantly updating her status and chatting with friends. On the arm of her wheelchair, she has her cell phone attached via Velcro, and according to Peg, she can text faster than anyone. She watches "Saturday Night Live" clips constantly and always makes her therapists laugh by sharing them. She's a fan of "Glee," especially Sue Sylvester, and is currently reading Tina Fey's new book, "Bossypants." She regularly attends Puyallup Foursquare Church on Saturdays.

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As her dog, Charlie, sleeps at her feet, Richelle Heacock talks about her life after the devastating accident that took away her ability to walk.



Michael Bonn Clackamas Print