



Brann family cites faith, family and community through trial

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Wallowa County Chieftain

It's a fact: Bad things happen to good people. The Brann family seems like they have the world by the tail. Parents Darrell and Christi are hard-working; Darrell as a contractor who has lived in the county since 2001, and owns the OK Theatre, while Christi is a Wallowa County native and stay-at-home mom who home schools her children.

The Brann children, Meredith, Hartwell, Alden, Isabelle and Parker, are beyond reproach; hard-working, affable and musically inclined like their parents. Dedicated Christians, the family attends church regularly and through the theater and music, is a regular community presence in a positive sense. Like Job, the family had everything going for it.

Darrell Brann was at Safeway picking up some candy for his son, Parker, when he got the first call about the calamity. He was in the checkout line and decided to return the call later. When it immediately rang again, he knew he needed to answer. Alden, 11, while visiting close family friends had been severely burned over 5-7 percent of his body after an accident with burning gasoline (Alden was not playing with gasoline). Christi Brann received a call from Darrell about the accident.

In the meantime the friends had driven Alden to Wallowa Memorial Hospital, calling the hospital to inform them of the accident while on the way. Alden said the hospital doors were still closed when he arrived at emergency and they waited about a minute before a nurse opened them.

The friends responded to Alden's accident in textbook manner. The boy's polyester/cotton blend shirt had literally gone up in flames, creating flash burns on his face. The deeper burns came when the shirt kept burning despite the "stop, drop and roll" response of Alden and the family friends.

"His shirt wouldn't go out," Darrell Brann said. "When he was trying to get the shirt off, the fire was blazing around his neck and the hands, and it really burnt the hands deeply."

Son Parker went with Darrell to the ER. The father said the scene was traumatic, but Alden responded with stoicism. Darrell said he seemed concerned that the family friends be told he was all right. The 11-year-old also told his father: "This is something you always think will happen to someone else until it happens to you."

In the ER, it was thought Alden's lungs and possibly tongue were scorched, and he was having trouble swallowing, so the decision was made to intubate him and send him by air flight to Legacy Emmanuel Hospital in Portland for treatment. After a family conference, it was decided Darrell would make the flight with his son.

In the meantime, thunderstorms were building up and limiting flight, so a plan to get Alden to Pendleton and get a plane there was under works. While Alden was getting prepped, the sky opened up and a flight transferred Alden and Darrell to Portland.

"When we landed, there was such a team that came around him," Darrell said. "Every expert of every area of the body is there to analyze." He added that even the surgeon who would later perform skin graft surgery was there to assess the damage.

Alden woke slightly as the plane was landing, and even with the pain of the burns on his hands, managed



One big happy family: The Branns (Back row L to R) Darrell Brann, Christi Brann, Hartwell Brann, Meredith Brann. (Front row L to R) Isabelle Brann, Parker Brann, and Alden Brann.

to convey a message: "The first thing he did was sign the heart to me," Darrell said.

The next morning, Alden held on to his good attitude. He still had a breathing tube and couldn't vocalize his wants. On a piece of paper with the alphabet printed on it. He asked how to say "thank you" in sign language, something he later did whenever nurses brought him anything. At about 10 a.m., the breathing tube was removed, which proved somewhat miserable. While Alden was transferred to the burn center where he was introduced to his new caretakers, his mother and grandmother arrived. This put the boy in high spirits.

"That's when he started cracking jokes," Darrell said. Alden immediately wanted to drive his cart to the burn center, even though his hands were heavily bandaged.

"They told us that five to seven percent of his body was burned," Christi said. "It was mostly second degree, but some third degree burns." The parents were told the daily bandage changes and burn examinations would dictate the course of treatment.

Children Meredith and Hartwell came by that week. Meredith got the call about the accident while driving into town. Parker, because of his age, could not visit for some time. This proved a boon for the parents.

"When Meredith and Hartwell came, it gave Christi and I a chance to decompress together," Darrell said. "It was huge just to be able to step out of the room."

After about a week, Darrell had to temporarily return to Enterprise to help prepare the Theatre for its 100th anniversary celebration on July 12-13.

"I was sure the event would happen, but I thought we may not cover expenses, because I was still trying to get the last of the sponsorships, and a lot of the event is the last couple of weeks of promotion to get people there."

Darrell said what was important became very clear: Being there for Alden and the rest of the family. He did what he could while Alden was asleep, but the rest of the time he and the other family members fed,



YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD MAN DOWN — Despite suffering some severe burns in a fire accident, you can't keep Alden Brann down. The 11 year-old is well on the road to recovery, thanks to his unflinching optimism and the support of his family and community.

read to, talked to or sang to Alden, which helped keep his spirits up.

Initial bandage changes were described as "pretty traumatic," and once they became less so, the decision was made to do skin graft surgery, which everyone had to gear themselves up for. Asked how he

At about the same time, the family met a man, Brian, who was severely burned to the point of amputated limbs 20 years before. Alden noted the man and his family were still full of faith and hope. It also helped the boy to keep his own burns in perspective. The two families have started a friendship.

Christi said that not everything was a downer. She said Alden played bingo while Alden mentioned chocolate pudding and remote control cars he played with. Christi's friend, Kate Moss, took over Facebook post duties on Alden's progress for Darrell while Christi's sister started a GoFundMe page, which helped immensely as he hadn't thought much about his contracting jobs. And the car needed tires.

"It gave us room to be at ease through the process and the ability to make trips back and forth to Portland," Darrell said. "It was amazing."

Even more amazing was the outpouring from the community and even around the country, of sympathy, encouragement and even people who said they were inspired by Alden's story and his courage.

The boy and his family remained in the hospital for two weeks and two days. Alden wanted desperately to go to the centennial celebration, but the surgeon said on Friday, July 12, that the following week was more likely.

During the final week, Darrell made three trips back to Enterprise. At one point, Stangel Industries and Machine Shop owner Dick Stangel had called and offered to fly Alden home for the celebration.

"That's so wonderful, but it looks like a no," Darrell told Stangel because of the prognosis. Stangel replied to let him know if things changed. They did.

On the morning of Saturday, July 13, Darrell had taken a break from the day's preparations to run home and take care of an online ticket problem when Christi called and said Alden was getting discharged immediately.

"I couldn't believe it," Darrell said with wonder still in his voice. "I really couldn't believe it."

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Darrell Brann

prepared himself, Alden laughed and said, "Just get ready. I don't really know."

Alden, who is 11 going on 40, took some time to reflect on the event, according to his dad.

"He said he didn't know how he'd have gotten through without his faith and family," Darrell said. "He didn't know how you could move forward without hope. It's pretty amazing that an 11-year-old could come up with those lines in the middle of it."

A neighbor offered to make a welcome back banner and had it ready in time for Alden's return, where he was greeted like a rock star that very afternoon. Virtually everyone at the celebration took pictures and offered congratulations on his return.

Asked if there was anything else the community could do to help, Brann shook his head.

"At this point we just want to thank the community," Darrell said. "We're trying to catch back up on thank yous because there's so many now." He added thanks may come in the form of a free family concert for the community. He added that the community also started a meal train that would keep them in meals for several weeks.

The family has survived the incident intact. While some families may have been torn apart by the accident, the Branns stood firm.

"The family this happened with is like family to us," Darrell said. "You run risks when you let your kids be close to other people and be out of your sight. We live next to a river and someone could have fallen in the river and we would have felt the burden of guilt."

Brann added that we are all in a community with everyone putting things at risk at some level and that we all try to look out for each other. The fact that the event was an accident and not intentional also mitigates feelings.

"It helped pull us together," Christi said.

Darrell also said the accident helped him to look back and see how hard he pushed to get the centennial celebration done and maybe he wasn't putting in time where he should.

The children were asked how they felt about the incident at the time. Meredith, 17, said she initially got a text to call quick because something had happened.

"I thought someone had died, so I was mostly grateful the whole time," she said. Sister Isabelle said she was shocked and didn't believe it when she heard the news.

"When we got to the hospital I was still too shocked to think anything," she said. "Later on I got used to it." She also served as an information conduit, telling him the latest news and recording Alden's highlights for social media.

Both parents said the community reaction to the accident was overwhelming.

"The amount of help from the community, even from those we don't know well, sent encouraging notes, while others offered money to help ease the burden," he said. "The reality is those things have helped. I know people without a lot of means are giving, and it all adds up. It's humbling for certain. The power of a small town is so huge."

The Branns advised that any family undergoing a similar event would do well to depend on each other. Darrell said he was aware that sometimes the Branns are looked at as a kind of "super family," which he attributed to the family's strong convictions and faith in God.

"We know it's God's hand and not anything of our own," Brann said. "We do strive to follow the example of Christ in loving one another and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This event brought that clearly into focus and into the center of our life, so in that way, we're really grateful for the whole thing."

Asked what he'd advise families going through a similar situation, Brann said, "Try to find ways to communicate through it and see what's important in life. We're guaranteed nothing. Every day we have with Alden is a blessing."

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