

Boy dies from rare flesh-eating bacteria

Nightmare started with bike wreck; fundraisers created to help family

By KATHY ANEY
STAFF WRITER

Liam Flanagan seemed a typical eight-year-old boy. The Pilot Rock second grader rode his bike, scarfed down molasses cookies after school and roughhoused with his three step-brothers. He loved to wear camo and feed the animals on his family's farm.

But life, as the saying goes, can turn on a dime.

On Jan. 13, Liam wrecked his bike as he rode down a hill on his family's Spring Creek property. Blood seeped from a thigh wound where the end of the handlebar sliced through his jeans.

An emergency room doctor stitched him up and the incident seemed destined to fade from memory as just another foible in the life of an active young boy.

Several days later, however, Liam found himself fighting for his life.

Flesh-eating bacteria, which likely entered his wound from the soil, attacked the boy's soft tissue. In the days to come he would endure four surgeries to remove infected tissue.

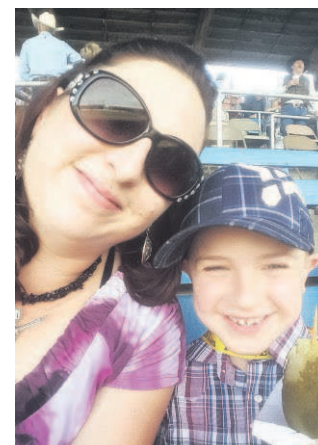
Liam's mom, Sara Hebard and stepfather, Scott Hinkle, realized something wasn't right that Wednesday when Liam complained of intense pain in his groin area. Scott took a look and reacted with alarm at what he saw.

"It was purplish-red and gangrenous looking," he said. "We threw him in the rig and went like hell."

After surgery at St. Anthony Hospital to remove infected tissue, Liam and his mother flew by air ambulance to Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland early the next Thursday



Scott Hinkle and Sara Hebard of Pilot Rock lost their son, Liam Flanagan, 8, pictured in the cell phone photo, after an eight-day battle with a flesh-eating bacteria.



Liam Flanagan and Sara Hebard attend the Pendleton Round-Up several years ago.

and that he'd be OK," Scott said. "He said he missed me."

Now that Liam is gone, Sara and Scott are reeling in a rush of memories.

"He was a bright ray of sunshine," Sara said. "He loved everyone and everyone loved him. He was one of those people who would walk into a room and would draw everyone."

"He was a lovable kid," Scott said of the boy who uncomplainingly helped him build fences and do other tasks around the farm. "He never had a bad word to say."

They are second-guessing themselves. Maybe if they'd gotten Liam to the hospital sooner when he first complained of pain they had chalked up as normal. They want other parents to know about this flesh-eating bacteria, something they didn't previously know about.

"We don't want any other parents to go through this," Scott said.

The community is raising funds to help the family with medical and funeral expenses. A Gofundme account had already raised \$43,000 as of Monday night and accounts have been set up at Banner Bank and Old West Federal Credit Union.



Liam Flanagan lies in his hospital bed during his battle with necrotizing fasciitis.

morning. Scott stayed back to care for the other boys. In Portland, the surreal nightmare continued as surgeons tried to stay ahead of the rare but deadly infection, known as necrotizing fasciitis, by

amputating parts of the boy's body.

"They basically cut him up piece by piece," Scott said.

"Almost his whole right side was gone," Sara said.

"We don't want any other parents to go through this."

Scott Hinkle, Liam's stepfather

"They kept cutting and hoping. Cutting and hoping."

Eventually, as Liam kept going downhill, he was transferred to Randall Children's Hospital on Jan. 21 so another team could take a look at the problem. That night, Liam died.

Sara said she is still processing. Her emotions run the gamut. She smiles in wonderment as she recalls how he tried to keep his family and friends from worrying as he lay in his hospital bed in a nest of tubes, electrodes, cables and monitors. He FaceTimed with friends,

laughing, joking and showing his tubes.

"He told them 'It's just going to be a couple of days and I'll be coming home,'" Sara said. "He was so strong and so brave."

At one point, Liam was feeling dehydrated and Sara promised she wouldn't eat or drink until he was able. Liam wouldn't have it.

"He took my hand and said he just needed a hug," she recalled.

Scott spoke to Liam for the last time by phone on Jan. 19.

"I told him to be strong

Short legislative session is tight fit for big proposals

Local legislators talk about what they're pitching in 35-day session

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER



Sen. Bill Hansell



Rep. Greg Smith

Rep. Greg Smith of Hepner said he anticipates long days when the legislature's short session convenes Monday.

The Republican representing House District 57 has eight committee assignments, including vice chair on the House committee on revenue, co-vice chair on the joint committee on ways and means and co-chair on a ways and means subcommittee.

"I'm really going to spend the vast majority of my time working policy issues through money," Smith said.

Some issues are heavy lifts for the 35-day session, such as the implications the federal tax bill carries for Oregon and the state's budget.

"Oregon is 100 percent connected with federal tax law," Smith said, so lawmakers need to determine whether any parts of Oregon's tax law should break those connections. That's complicated, he said, and the conversations will not be easy.

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, said at an Associated Press forum Monday "we've got a serious budget issue" because of an expected deficit of \$200 million to \$300 mil-

lion stemming from those changes.

Republican Sen. Bill Hansell of Athena said reforming the Public Employee Retirement System is another major piece that comes with no easy answers. Democratic Gov. Kate Brown's task force on how to cover some of the system's \$20-billion unfunded liability included selling off state universities and the State Accident Insurance Fund. Hansell called those bad ideas. SAIF, he said, is one of Oregon's best functioning programs, so selling that makes no sense.

Hansell said he believes the short session should be about tweaks to the state's budget, approving legislation that has broad bipartisan support and amending bills that made it into law from the previous session.

Senators get to propose one bill each while representatives get two, and lawmakers have just 10 days to shuttle legislation through both chambers.

Smith will sponsor House Bill 4153 to designate Eastern Oregon University in La Grande as the state's rural university. Smith said the legislation is more than a "feel good" proposal. The designation would provide EOU some protection from

closure or cuts during tough economic times, he said, while sending the message the state's smaller universities matter as much as their larger compatriots.

Smith also said he is learning more about education policy because he serves as vice chair of the joint committee on student success. Oregon needs to take a good look at how education is working and what it should be doing better.

The Hermiston School District, the largest in Smith's House district, had the 21st worst graduation rate in the state, according to data from the Oregon Department of Education. Among the state's largest school districts, Hermiston is eighth from the bottom.

Hansell said he will push Senate Bill 1556 to help community banks.

Those banks assign loans to federal finance agencies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Hansell explained, which require the banks to use an electronic system to file while prohibiting the banks from recording the loan assignments in the county records. Hansell said counties are suing the banks to recover recording fees and his bill would ban those lawsuits. Nothing under Oregon law requires counties to record the bank's assignments, he said, and the counties are not entitled to a recording fee.

Smith and Hansell also emphasized bipartisanship would yield the best solutions.

To see a full list of proposals in the upcoming session, visit www.oregonlegislature.gov.

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