

Meet Renee Darga

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Renee practices standing

When you meet Renee, you can't help but laugh when you see, and hear, her laugh. It comes from deep within, and you know that she enjoys laughing, because once she starts, there's no stopping her. You also get the feeling that when she sets her mind on something, she doesn't stop easily. If you go by the progress she has made since coming to Rainbow almost 13 months ago, you don't get a "feeling", you see bona fide proof that she is a determined young woman.

Today, Renee shops, goes to dances, shops, goes out to eat with friends and family, and did we mention, shops?. She eats a regular diet - well, regular by 19 year old standards. She communicates all of her needs - verbally. She transfers with only stand-by assist, and can stand unsupported for 10 minutes. For most of us, the preceding activities are well, fairly routine (except perhaps the shopping part). Thirteen months ago, there was nothing routine about any of them for Renee - except perhaps in their non-occurrence.

Renee was a senior from Rogers City, Michigan when she was involved in a motor vehicle accident in November of 2002. By her family's account, she is very lucky to be alive. She was taken emergently to Alpena General Hospital with a Glasgow Coma Scale of 4 and quickly transferred to St. Mary's in Saginaw due to the severity of her injuries. In January of 2003, she went to Hurley Hospital in Flint. All in all, she spent nearly 5 months in the hospital. On March 3rd 2003, Renee arrived at Rainbow's Crane House with her mom and dad at her side.

Renee couldn't communicate at that time, except to respond to pain. She had minimal voluntary muscle control - she was dependent on others for all of her needs. She couldn't eat, and received all nutrition via a g-tube.

Renee started therapy immediately - PT, OT, and Speech. She was in therapy 5 days a week. The work was hard, but her therapists could see her begin to emerge - both in spirit and determination. Within the first month, she began to reliably communicate - following commands, smiling appropriately. By May 2003, she was able to comb her hair, and had started to feed herself. She could sit for 30-45 seconds

and keep her head up for 10-15 seconds. In June 2003 she was sitting with contact guard for 5-10 minutes. During October 2003, Renee could hold her head up for 30 minutes to 1 hour, and was eating 3 meals a day. She became independent with wheelchair mobility. In February of 2004, she was able to put her socks and shoes on, transfer with contact guard assistance and stand for 8-10 minutes. She also started to use her right hand at that time and she had made gains in 30 areas of cognitive functioning.

Just recently, I spoke with Renee and her family - dad Dan, mom Audrey, and younger sister Felicia. We talked about how far Renee has come, where she has been, and her goals for the future. There have been many changes for the Darga family in the last 18 months - and they seem a remarkably resilient family. They drive weekly from Rogers City to Ypsilanti - that's 260 miles one way - to visit Renee. They are active in Renee's rehab - they participate in her therapies, they have learned her care, and they rolled with the steady changes that Renee has made. I asked Renee about her future goals. She told me she wants to walk, write better, use her right hand, and go to school. I asked dad the same. He wants to see Renee go to college, get married do "everything."



Felicia, Dan, Audrey & Renee Darga

I asked the Darga's what they miss too. Felicia misses her at home - but now they gab on the phone like sisters do. Mom misses a lot - she had to admit she even misses the sibling rivalry. They are a family with high hopes - for Renee and for her future. They reminded me that many in the medical community felt Renee had little chance at making functional gains. And they are a very thankful family too - thankful to Dr. Fields at St. Mary's whom they credit with saving Renee's life - thankful that Gwen Wyttenbach of Liberty Mutual has been supportive every step of the way, thankful to her Rainbow team for pushing her and resolving problems when they arose. I think dad summed up their feelings best when he said the key "is to never give up hope - listen to your heart and you'll make the right decisions!" §