

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Alicia Hager

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It was May 22, 1994, and an exceptionally warm spring day in Michigan. Alicia Hager and her two girlfriends were looking forward to an afternoon of swimming. Her friend's mother had offered to take them to the pool. Hopping into the bed of the pick-up truck, the three girls gave no thought to the danger they faced by not riding in the truck's cab. *"We left and were having a good time," said Alicia, "just 13-year-old girls, wind blowing through their hair, having fun."*

The fun soon ended when a car broadsided the bed of the truck. *"We were trying to hold on when it was flipping, and we were flung out," said Alicia. "I went head first into a curb, and my girlfriend also did. We were just about a foot from each other where we landed. I don't remember anything from the accident. I do remember my head hitting something hard."*

She awoke two days later in the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor with a cracked skull resulting in a hemotoma to the back-left side of her head and road rash over 80 percent of her body. The light summer clothing she was wearing had offered little protection during the crash. She had no memory of what had happened or why she was in the hospital.

"I couldn't move," said Alicia of her injuries. "My whole body hurt." She was discharged from the hospital just four days later, but she received no follow-up treatment for her brain injury. *"Ever since that day, my whole*

life changed. I didn't really notice it at first," said Alicia. "I was in the hospital for four days. I had no rehab, nothing ... They sent me home. I didn't know I had a head injury. My mom didn't know." But her mother did notice the changes in her following the accident. *"She would look at me and just keep looking ... I'd constantly ask her why and tell her to quit, but that was my mom's first sign of knowing, 'This is not my Alicia – this is not my girl!'"*

Frustrated and in denial, Alicia refused to admit anything was wrong with her, but when she returned to school in the fall to begin eighth grade, it hit her. Her schoolwork became increasingly difficult. A bright student, her grades began to plummet. Her teachers began to notice that something wasn't right.

One of the best safety habits that parents can help children establish is the use of seat belts.

Seat belts prevent total ejection from motor vehicles. In 2005, 75 percent of passenger vehicle occupants who were totally ejected from their vehicle were killed. In contrast, only one in 100 drivers and passengers in fatal crashes who were wearing their seat belts were totally ejected.

Parents must set the example—If you buckle up, your children are more likely to buckle up as well.

Sources:
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Seatbelts Save Lives



Safety belts reduce fatalities in truck roll overs by 80%

As her frustration level increased, she became belligerent in the classroom. In an effort to help her, the school administration moved her into a special education class in the middle of her eighth grade year. Since she seemed to be adjusting, they began to give her harder classes that included math and German, but she was unable to

comprehend and retain the information.

As her frustration increased, so did her aggression. Eventually she was removed from the special education program. *"I had a hard time. I got suspended,"* said Alicia, *"and eventually they kicked me out. That was nearing the end of the school year. So they passed me anyway, even though I was failing."*

Without the needed support following her accident, Alicia continued to spiral downward. In response, her mother enrolled her in counseling.

Unable to return for high school because she had been suspended the year

before, Alicia was placed in the special education program at Huron High School in New Boston. She soon fell into the wrong crowd and joined a gang. Drug use and promiscuity followed. *"My mom didn't know what to do with me,"* said Alicia. *"I wasn't home at all, and I was fighting more with my parents – I mean huge fights. I'd get so frustrated I'd lock myself in my room. I'd burn stuff; I'd punch holes in the walls; I got violent with my mom and my sister, and couldn't control myself."*

Fortunately, her teachers at Huron High School were very supportive and helpful. Her home economics and health instructor, Ms. Brown, told her mother about Rainbow, but it was not until Alicia's behavior worsened that she finally received treatment. She was placed in Wyandotte Hospital for two weeks. Just under a week after her discharge, she was re-admitted



Alicia Today...

After high school, Alicia found a job and met Chad Mattila. The two began dating, had their oldest daughter Haley and moved to northern Michigan. They officially married in March of 2003. Soon after, Alicia became pregnant with their second child, Ava. The couple then relocated to southeast Michigan (Lincoln Park) where they both found employment.

Unfortunately, the marriage was not working out and the couple recently divorced. With the stability of her marriage removed, Alicia realized that she needed additional support to aid her through her divorce as she transitioned from marriage to single parenthood. She readmitted to Rainbow in December of 2006 and is residing with her two girls in a Rainbow Townhouse.

"I'm working on being a single parent, taking care of my kids, trying to get back on track. People say, 'You're relying on Rainbow, and it's an easy ticket.' It's not – it's hard. It's the first time ever in a long time that I haven't been employed. So, I'm working on getting back out there."

Alicia's stay at Rainbow has helped her get her feet back on the ground as she seeks employment opportunities. She has enjoyed interacting with and encouraging other clients because she has been in their shoes and understands their frustration. She eagerly anticipates beginning college classes this fall in early childhood development.

"[after Rainbow] I went home a completely different person. My heart was bigger, and I could cope with things a lot better."

after becoming violent with a teacher. Confused and depressed, she showed no remorse for her violent outbursts. *"I just didn't care who I hurt. I hated myself,"* said Alicia. *"I didn't care if I lived or died."*

When she ran away with her boyfriend, her mother followed her with a police escort. When she became violent with her mother, the police intervened. Facing juvenile detention or the option to go home with her mother, she chose the latter. In the meantime, her mother had begun talking to Dr. Mariann Young, Rainbow's pediatric program director. *"We went up there and talked to Mariann at Rainbow at Farmington House,"* said Alicia. *"About a half hour into it, she told me 'The hour is now,' and I got frustrated and threw a fit*

knowing I was going to stay. The first two weeks at Rainbow were difficult."

Although initially uncomfortable, Alicia soon began to enjoy being at Rainbow. She and fellow program participants attended camp and began to develop friendships with one another. Soon after their return from camp, she started attending Farmington High School.

In Rainbow's supportive environment, Alicia began to change. She was able to talk about her injury with the staff and other patients and express how she was feeling, knowing they could relate. *"We had our therapy, and I loved it! I had my chance to talk without somebody criticizing me,"* said Alicia. *"It was hard talking to my mom because she couldn't relate. She felt bad, you know. She didn't know what was wrong with her daughter."*

The Rainbow staff helped her learn different techniques to express anger. She remembers Karen, a para-professional who would sit and talk with her. Knowing she liked to write, Karen took her to purchase a journal. Whenever Alicia became frustrated, she would write, scribble and even bash her pen into the journal to alleviate her aggression.

With the support and encouragement, Alicia finished her sophomore year and returned home in June of 1997. *"It was sad to go, but it was time for me to go. I went home a completely different person. My heart was bigger, and I could cope with things a lot better,"* said Alicia.

She enrolled at Huron Oaks in Ypsilanti, Michigan and began her junior year that fall. Midway through the year, Huron High School decided they would give

her a second chance and allow her to enroll. They were not disappointed. Alicia graduated with high honors and was inducted into the National Honor Society with a 3.6 GPA.

"I still to this day thank my mom," said Alicia of her experience at Rainbow. "If she did not send me to Rainbow, I probably would be dead – literally. You know, I had thoughts of suicide and attempts ... If Rainbow was not there in 1996 and 1997, I would not be here. That's a definite. I'm going to say it again, and I'll keep saying it. Rainbow is just a great program. That's it. Inpatient, outpatient – it's great." ♦



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