

A little help from friends

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At 5:15 a.m. on May 22, Kayla King got a phone call.

Her boyfriend of two years, A.J. Underwood, had been in a car wreck. He was at Wayne Memorial Hospital, and rescue workers were airlifting him to Vidant Medical Center in Greenville.

He had been driving to work when he swerved, crashed and was thrown from his Nissan Frontier.

She got in her car and braced for the worst.

As she raced to the hospital, Kayla called A.J.'s mother, Jody Mitchell.

Jody got on the road immediately. It is a seven-hour drive from her home in West Virginia.

"It was very hard driving here," Jody said. Kayla sent her updates along the way.

Kayla got to the hospital just as the rescue team landed.

An hour and a half later, she was allowed to see A.J.

"The worst thoughts went through my mind," she said.

The back of his head was scalped, he shattered his eye socket, cracked his ribs, had internal bleeding in his kidneys and brain, had a bruised liver and had three fractures in his neck, a broken right hip and a broken lower back.

Nobody was sure what was going to happen on May 23 when A.J. went into surgery to fix his hip and back. The doctors were worried they would have to give the women bad news.

A.J. was expected to stay at the hospital for two months.

He was out in eight days.

Kayla says it is nothing short of a miracle.

"After the surgeries, they said he will make an 80 percent to full recovery," Kayla said. "I think it was a blessing in disguise for him. It was an eye opener, he's realizing who is caring about him and who is not."

He won't walk for the next three months. He can't lift over 10 pounds or put his arms over his head.

It takes his mother 30 minutes to get him out of bed, even for a bathroom trip. Someone always has to stay with him, in case of an emergency.

Kayla is not strong enough to get him into his back brace. She helps by holding the sheets taut while Jody rolls him into the plastic sheath.

"He doesn't feel right with us doing everything for him," Kayla said.

She sleeps on a pallet next to his bed.

1 / 3

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Jody Mitchell tightens the straps of her son A.J. Underwood's back brace as he lies in bed at his home on St. John Church Road Tuesday. His girlfriend Kayla Miles rubs his leg to comfort him through the painful process. Injuries he sustained as the result of a wreck two weeks ago make it impossible for him to take care of himself. Mitchell, who lives in West Virginia, is staying with her son for several weeks because Miles is not strong enough to tighten the brace.

"I'd rather be here than at a funeral," she said. "It's worth it."

She rubs his leg gently while his mother tightens the brace down. It makes it hard to get a full breath.

Kayla is devoted to A.J. The two went to high school together. It is evident to his mother that they are in it for the long haul.

"I had the opportunity to run just as fast as I could, and at 21 it's hard, but I'm here," Kayla said.

The community has rallied around the couple.

A.J.'s employer, DLT Construction, is holding his job and collecting cash donations on his behalf.

His boss, Patrick Duffy, helped Kayla search through the ditch on the side of the road for A.J.'s wallet.

The hardest part for Kayla has been seeing the wreck site, still splattered with his blood.

"Every time I close my eyes, I see him getting thrown out of the truck and lying there in the dark, and there's nothing I can do to help him," she said. "Our whole relationship has been a mutual thing, and there's nothing I can do about this."

Their church, Brogden Chapel, has a nonstop prayer chain.

That's all Kayla said they need now.

"Just prayers," she said. "Everything else is going to fall into place."

Family and friends have provided meals and rides.

Her grandfather paid to have a ramp built up to the couple's trailer. He spent \$587 on lumber. Labor was going to be \$2,000.

Instead, Jim Daughtry's crew built the ramp for free.

They were out there from 7:45 a.m. until after 6 p.m.

"They did not stop," Kayla said.

What's more, when A.J. can walk again, they will replace the ramp with the stairs again for free.

Kayla's employer Logan's Roadhouse, paid the couple's rent. They have taken cash donations and promised her as much time as she needs.

She worked there as a server a little over a week when the crash happened.

They fed her, offered support and rallied around her.

"They said if I need anything, they're on their way," Kayla said.

On June 3, she went back to work.

The restaurant is still taking donations for Kayla and A.J., the general manager said.

Jody tears up when she talks about the support shown to her son.

"How can we say thank you?" she asked. "How can we ever say how much this means?"

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