



Gabby DeSouza: "There is still nothing I can't do! Even with a new leg."

Teen learns to live with prosthetic device during recovery from near-fatal boating accident

July 27, 2011

A pretty, precocious 15-year-old from Palm Beach Gardens is determined to walk up the sidewalk to the front door of Palm Beach Gardens High School on Aug. 22 to begin the ninth grade.

Gabrielle "Gabby" DeSouza is not unlike the "unsinkable" Molly Brown who survived the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. Gabby survived a local water tragedy that almost took her life and did take the lower portion of her shapely right leg.

The key word here is "walk" up to the front door. She may even run.

Before the accident, there was nothing that Gabby couldn't do in the sports she loves — tennis, softball and volleyball.

After the accident, not much has changed. Especially her attitude.

She says profoundly when you ask her, "there is still nothing I can't do! Even with a new leg."

It all happened Feb. 5, when Gabby was sitting on the beach, south of the Juno Beach Park Pier with six friends in a non-boating swimming area. Two young schoolmates drove their boat up to the beach in spite of repeated warnings by lifeguards and though the water was too shallow for boats.

As she was climbing into the boat, the motor was unexpectedly revved up and Gabby's leg became severely mangled by the boat propeller.

The startled drivers then sped away in their boat without helping her.

Others on the beach did help, of course, and Gabby's mother, Shannon DeSouza, who was just across the street at a shop, ran to her side.

Rescue crews flew her to the Trauma Center at St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach.

Gabby almost died from loss of blood and the loss of part of her leg, below the knee, in surgery performed by trauma surgeon Teofilo Lama.

Also in attendance from the beginning was Dr. Robert Borrego, medical director of St. Mary's Trauma Center, her doctor today.

"When Gabby arrived at St. Mary's, she was in class IV hemorrhagic shock (and probably why the teen doesn't remember the pain from the accident). That is the highest type of shock due to blood loss," Borrego said. "That's more than 40 percent of the total blood volume. Very critical."

Today, more than a dozen operations later, hours of painful physical therapy and the addition of a new portion of her leg (prosthesis) made to fit just her, Gabby is back doing almost everything again.

An interview session, set up with help from Gabby's mom Shannon DeSousa and Ryan Lieber, Tenet Healthcare PR Manager North, was conducted while this courageous young lady was going through a weekly therapy session with therapist Kathleen Snow at St. Mary's.

"I still feel my foot," said the smiling, typical teen, sitting on a therapy bed and chatting on her cell phone. "Sometimes I look down to see if it is still there. It's weird. What is still bothering me most is my knee."

When you look at her leg, it is obvious she has had the best of care. She looks fantastic, healthy, happy, tan and appears completely unaffected by her plight, although she has been through unimaginable pain and suffering. Her smile could melt an iceberg.

Many of the long scars on her other leg are almost invisible. The upper portion of her right leg is nicely rounded and already tanned like the rest of her attractive young figure, under short shorts and a tee-top.

Gabby is not embarrassed to show the leg or have it photographed.

"She is one of the most self-assured, well adjusted teens I have ever met," said Lieber, who stopped by to see the progress. "She's such a regular, normal teenager who loves to cruise the malls, play all kinds of sports and talk for hours on the phone. Yet, she has an inner strength that is incredible."

On this particular day, Gabby is getting a massage by Snow, followed by nerve-activated stimulation on the leg called e-stem therapy. She enjoys it and says it tickles.

"Her kneecap may still be dislocated somewhat," Snow explained, "and we have more work to do on the swelling to fit into the new prosthesis she will be getting soon."

Gabby slips into the leg-addition, complete with a flip-flop on the foot, to match the sandal she is wearing on the left foot, and with matching nail polish.

She stands up, and, with only a slight limp, walks easily over to the walk track, does her routine.

She then raises the treadmill up to level 10 as she runs through her paces with no mistakes.

"She is remarkable on the prosthesis," Snow said. "She has come along much faster than most of my patients, and only has trouble with walking long distances, on stairs, gravel or grass. Then she uses her crutches to help her.

"It's all about the socket. We'll have the right fit eventually," Snow added.

Borrego is very pleased with her improvement, he said.

"Her prognosis is great. Gabby has made an incredible recovery in a short time," he said. "Gabby's courage and will to survive and get better have been extraordinary. She's a true hero." When asked about the two boys who were driving the boat that day, Gabby said everyone thinks she hates them, but says she doesn't.

"They did come to visit me in the hospital. I just don't want to be friends anymore. But I don't want them to go to jail or anything like that."

The boys, whose names have not been released, were both charged with leaving the scene of an accident with injury, reckless operation of a vessel and culpable negligence.

Gabby, who says she doesn't have a boyfriend at this time, is looking forward to attending Palm Beach Gardens High School next month.

"They even held a 'Gabby Fest' at Palm Beach Gardens High to raise money for me. That was wonderful," she added.

As a single mom, Shannon DeSouza, insurance coordinator for Palm Beach Gardens dentist Andres Vargas, needs help paying for the tremendous hospital expenses caused by this disastrous event. But like her daughter, she is upbeat and confident about the future.

"Gabby has learned and gained so much from this. We all have," she said.

"She's still a teenager who hasn't let this tragedy slow her down one bit. She is still the same girl she was; a little tougher, but the same Gabby. She still has the normal teenage hang-ups, emotions and attitude, which I'm so grateful for."

To make a donation, contact the Coral Springs Professional Benevolent Association, c/o Gabby DeSouza, PO Box 9665, Coral Springs, FL 33075. To plan fundraisers, contact Shannon DeSouza at shannondesouza@aol.com.

<http://www.tcpalm.com/news/2011/jul/27/gabby-desouza-there-is-still-nothing-i-cant-do-a/>