

Humor helps take sting out of father's disability

Dad finds Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship to help daughter pursue goals

By Shandra Martinez for ATSSA



Courtney Parsons credits her drive to succeed in part to watching the courage her dad, Brandon Parsons, showed when a work zone crash changed his life dramatically.

Brandon was a foreman on a paving crew repairing a road in Oregon on Oct. 11, 2016 when the driver of a pickup passed several vehicles, including a pilot car, before smashing into the paver and then Brandon.

Brandon lost his right foot and the lower portion of his right leg as a result of the work zone incident. His left leg was also badly injured. He has undergone nine surgeries so far to address the damage to both legs and more will be required over the long term, his doctors said.

Brandon worked for Lakeside Industries, a paving and asphalt company in Longview, Wash., at the time of the crash. He started working for the company at age 18 and had been there 23 years

before the incident left him permanently disabled at age 42.

Growing up fast

Courtney, the oldest of three children, was 1 1/2 months into her high school career, busy with her softball travel team and looking forward to the start of another deer hunting season with her dad. Then everything changed.

"I definitely say I grew up pretty quick because my mom was going to be very preoccupied with my dad," Courtney said, adding that her role shifted. "I would help with my brother and sister. I think it's made me realize there is a lot worse that can happen."

Her father was up and walking in the hospital within a week after his injuries—not easy considering he had several compound fractures in his remaining leg. As if that wasn't enough of a challenge, that leg had been injured in a previous work accident years earlier, resulting in broken bones in the ankle area. Over time, he developed bone spurs there and, as a result, moving his ankle is painful. Since the latest event, he wears a full leg brace to provide support.

The silver lining of her dad's traumatic injury is that he has been available to attend his children's sports contests. Courtney, now 18, played on her high school softball team and is now playing in college. Her sister Sydney, now 16, plays softball and cheers, and had played volleyball. Brother Blake, now 14, plays baseball, basketball and football.

"Now, if he isn't at his many doctor's appointments, he's

home, which is super nice," Courtney said.

Guardsmen are lifesavers

Erin Parsons was at home in Kelso, Wash., when she received the call that her husband had been in an accident, both of his legs were "messed up" and he was being airlifted to a nearby hospital. She raced to school to pick up their children before heading to Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) in Portland, about an hour away.

There was no emergency service close to the winding road near Rainier, Ore., where Brandon was struck by a pickup. The family later learned Brandon asked about the pickup driver as he lay on the ground, concerned that the other man was OK. Brandon also offered his belt when his crew couldn't find a tourniquet for his leg.

Brandon says he is alive because his paving crew included retired National Guardsman Matt Kuhnel who put his battlefield triage training to work that day.

Kuhnel immediately took charge of the situation. After providing first aid, including a tourniquet made from Brandon's belt, Kuhnel recognized there was no cellphone coverage in the area and sent part of the crew to the one house within a mile of the scene to use a landline to call for help. He then cut down a fence and spray painted a giant X on a nearby field to show the medical helicopter where to land when it arrived to take Brandon on the 20-minute flight to OHSU.

Brandon spent a total of 32 days at OHSU and a rehab hospital

▲ Courtney Parsons has hunted deer with her dad, Brandon Parsons, since she was small. A work zone incident left him with a prosthetic right leg, making it tougher to hunt.

Photos courtesy of Courtney Parsons

before going home. He now uses a prosthetic for his lower right leg. Doctors were able to save his upper leg, including the knee joint, which made it easier for him to learn to walk with the prosthetic.

Coping through laughter

Courtney and her dad continue to go deer hunting but Brandon isn't as mobile now so they often hunt from his truck.

"I know his leg gets really beat up when he walks on it and he's in a lot of pain. He only takes a little pain medication for it. He's such a guy," she said.

"At first, my whole family was pretty upset and angry. My dad said, 'Don't be angry. I'm alive. I'm here with you,'" Courtney recalled. "He has been super mellow and calm about it. The way we cope with it is that we laugh at it. My sister calls him the one-legged wonder."

On the way to a doctor's appointment a week after being discharged from the hospital, Brandon spotted a sign for the International House of Pancakes restaurant chain with the name abbreviated as IHOP. Recognizing the implications of the way it's pronounced – I hop – he insisted on stopping to get a photo taken in front of the sign. Then he posted it on Facebook to garner some laughs from a friend.

Brandon spent a lot of time looking for ways to help Courtney prepare for the future. Determined to help her avoid college debt as much as possible, he found The American Traffic Safety Services (ATSS) Foundation Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship during an online search for scholarships and encouraged his daughter to apply. Last spring, Courtney was one of 14 students awarded a scholarship for the 2020-21 academic year.



▲ Courtney Parsons, pictured at age 11, said she has gone hunting with her dad "since before I could remember."

The competitive scholarship program offers up to \$10,000 annually for dependents of roadway workers killed or permanently disabled in work zone incidents. To date, The ATSS Foundation has awarded 88 scholarships worth more than \$300,000.

Courtney is in her first year at Bellevue College outside Seattle where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in obstetrics-gynecology ultrasound technology. The college's two-plus-two program allows her to obtain a four-year degree at junior college tuition rates. She already earned an associate degree through the "Running Start" program while attending Kelso High School.

"I remember thinking, dang, this is a pretty good scholarship and not many people can apply for it," Courtney said. "This could potentially cover my entire year of school, which would be so helpful. I've gotten a few scholarships, but this is definitely my biggest. I'm very grateful."

Brandon is also grateful there are organizations like The ATSS Foundation that honor the sacrifice of roadway workers

who have been killed or severely injured on the job by supporting their children.

"To still be alive to see her get the scholarship after what I went through means the world to me," he said. ///

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SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS DUE FEB. 15 FOR 2021-22 ACADEMIC YEAR

The ATSS Foundation annually awards scholarships to dependents of roadway workers killed or permanently disabled in work zone incidents. Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarships are competitive and awarded annually for up to \$10,000. Students who demonstrate a strong commitment to volunteerism are also eligible to apply for a Chuck Bailey Memorial Scholarship, an additional \$1,000 given in honor of a roadway safety member who died in 2002.

Applications are due Feb. 15. Download the application at Foundation.ATSSA.com/Scholarship.