

From despair rose meaning of life: Kids, to help others

Heather Grossman's life changed when a bullet left her paralyzed. Now, she is preparing to face the man accused of planning the attack: Her ex-husband.

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PARADISE VALLEY, Ariz. — If Ron Samuels were convicted of hiring an assassin to kill his wife, the maximum sentence would be life in prison.

That seems a fair enough punishment to Heather Grossman. She survived the 1997 murder attempt in Boca Raton but remains in her own prison for life. The hired killer's bullet tore through her neck, leaving her paralyzed and breathing on a ventilator. She requires 24-hour nursing care.



Taylor Jones/The Post

Nurse Tim Spalti positions Heather Grossman in a standing table as part of her weekly routine to battle bone and muscle deterioration resulting from paralysis. Her first ex-husband, Ronald Samuels, is accused of hiring hit men to kill the former Boca Raton woman amid a custody dispute and after she remarried in 1997.



Taylor Jones/The Post

STILL IN CHARGE: Heather Grossman lies in her bed as daughter Lauren tries to change her mind about grounding her. The punishment was not lifted. Grossman's ex-husband Ronald Samuels, who is Lauren's father, is accused of hiring hit men to kill Heather and her new husband, John Grossman, in 1997.



Taylor Jones/The Post

SUPPORTIVE: Heather Grossman and her father, Ralph Stephens, watch her son Ronnie, 15, play tennis at a tournament. Braving a cold Saturday afternoon, Grossman watched while bundled in blankets because her body is not able to regulate heat and cold. 'Wow, he's getting really good,' she says of Ronnie's playing. 'I'm so proud of him.'



Photo courtesy of Heather Grossman

IN 1997: After their wedding day, Heather and John Grossman moved to Boca Raton, where they were attacked that year. The Grossmans later divorced and he has since died.

Samuels is locked up in the Palm Beach County Jail without bail, awaiting trial for attempted first-degree murder and solicitation to commit murder. He has denied the charges.

In 1997, police caught two men who traded testimony for freedom, pointing the finger at Samuels, who then fled to Mexico. He spent six years in jail there for possession of cocaine. He was extradited to Palm Beach County Feb. 20.

Grossman expects to be called as a witness in the case. Just the thought of seeing Samuels again after so many years of fearing him ties her stomach in knots.

"I'm hoping that Ron Samuels will be spending a lot of years in jail," she said. "He took an active mother away from his children. I can't hug them. I can't play tennis with them."

She was a 22-year-old flight attendant for Eastern Airlines when she met Samuels, a wealthy Pensacola Toyota dealer. They married in 1988 and their first child, Ronnie, was born in 1989. Soon after, problems developed in their marriage, but by that time she was pregnant with twins, Joe and Lauren, born in 1991.

Grossman filed for divorce in 1994 and says Samuels started stalking her soon afterward. They engaged in a nasty tug-of-war for the children. He followed her to Minnesota, where her family lived. There, she met John Grossman. They married in 1997 and moved to Boca Raton. Samuels also moved to Boca Raton.

In October 1997, she told a judge she was receiving death threats and feared Samuels.

"I know he's going to kill me," she said.

Eight days later, at high noon on Oct. 14, 1997, at the busy intersection of Yamato Road and Federal Highway, two men in a Ford Thunderbird pulled alongside the Grossmans' Lincoln. One of the men shot a rifle through the Lincoln's back window, hitting Heather Grossman in the neck and partially severing her spine. A bullet grazed the chin of John Grossman, who was driving.

Heather Grossman barely hung on for nearly six weeks at Delray Medical Center. Her son Joe later wrote an essay, describing how he swung back and forth between hope and fear.

"Mom please don't die," he wrote. "I would not be able to survive if you do. Please mom please."

Permanent paralysis ought to be enough misery for one lifetime, but soon after she married her second husband, John Grossman, they, too, began having problems.

"I saw things during our relationship, but I ignored them," she said. "I truly believed he was going to save me and my children."

After she was shot, Grossman became verbally and physically abusive to her, her children and her parents and ordered her parents out of the house, she said. For four years, Ralph and Florence Stephens did not even know where their daughter lived.

She said she feared she would lose her financial support from Grossman's wealthy father, a former part-owner of the Minnesota Vikings professional football team.

In police reports, she accused Grossman of locking her in her room, spitting on her, dumping dog feces and garbage on her bed and throwing her from her chair to her bed so hard that she bounced. In restaurants, he would yell at her and smear food on her face. She also said Grossman denied food to her and the children, according to police reports.

Grossman denied his ex-wife's charges. He sued her parents for defamation. In that lawsuit, he accused his wife of pressuring him to pay her "millions of dollars."

On March 13, John Grossman died, leaving the suit in limbo.

After not seeing her daughter for four years, Florence Stephens was shocked by her condition. Her daughter had pneumonia and had withered from 110 to 93 pounds. Her grandchildren ate like refugees.

"When we first came, those kids were so hungry, I made bacon and eggs for months. They needed food. I've never bought so much bacon in my life," she said.

After their divorce in 2003, John Grossman's parents, who had been paying for much of the \$300,000-a-year cost of maintaining their daughter-in-law, withdrew their financial support.

So on the eve of her 39th birthday, Heather Grossman finds herself at the brink of financial disaster.

She has been denied full disability and Medicare benefits because she had not worked long enough before she was disabled.

She is considering downsizing her life. She fears going into a nursing home.

"I don't know what I have to do. I really don't want to think about it."

The Stephenses left their home and jobs in Minnesota, moved in to help care for their daughter and grandchildren and started a mail-order specialty shoe business to help pay the bills. But that is not closing the financial gap.

"I figure we'll be in the tank in a year or two," said Ralph Stephens, 62.

Like any mom, Heather Grossman is on the go constantly, to school, to doctor appointments, shopping, lacrosse, tennis and cheerleading. It just takes a lot more equipment and time.

Her maintenance is a painstaking process. It takes an hour a day for the nurse just to empty her bowels.

Her nurse of six years, Denise Foster, carefully soaps and rinses Grossman's thin, wasted arms, handling her rubbery limbs as if she were an heirloom doll. Carefully and slowly, she turns her on her side and dresses her.

"You're ready to rock and roll," proclaims Foster.

When day nurse Tim Spalti arrives at 9 a.m., he lifts her like a child, cradling her neck. He arranges her hips and shoulders so she is sitting evenly in the motorized chair. He smooths her manicured hands along the hand rests.

"Everything in my life has to be just so," Grossman says. "It's kind of annoying."

Spalti washes, dries and brushes her hair and carefully applies her makeup, a skill he has learned during the past year of working for Grossman. Now perfectly coiffed and dressed, Grossman sits like a queen on her throne.

"My favorite part of the day, coffee and the *Today* show," she says as Foster gives her sips from a cup. "Oh, that's so good."

Because a paralyzed body cannot move on its own and circulation is poor, the skin becomes irritated easily, the beginning of bed sores. When she sits in her chair, the day nurse repositions her frequently on an inflated seat cushion. At night, a special mattress rotates automatically every 15 minutes.

She stands in a structure that holds her upright, to maintain her bone mass, which is diminishing at a rapid rate.

She "rides" an \$18,000 Ergys exercise bicycle, bought for her by Beverly and Bud Grossman, her ex-husband's parents. The bike moves her legs by firing small electrical jolts into the muscles, keeping her muscles in tone, reducing spasms and providing cardio exercise.

Inserted in her throat is a metal ring that keeps her windpipe open. Into the opening goes a curved metal tube that carries air from the mechanical ventilator through plastic tubing that looks like a hair-dryer hose, inflating her paralyzed lungs.

If the ventilator malfunctions, her nurse can cover the metal ring with a cap. Once she is "capped" she can breathe unaided for short periods, using little shrugs of her shoulders, the only body movement she can control. She speaks normally, but only four or five words at a time, between gulps of air. Always, there is the whoosh-whoosh of the ventilator, 13,000 mechanical breaths a day.

There are plenty of hidden dangers in her life. In the bathroom next to her bedroom, a collection of tubes is drying on a shower curtain rod.

"If they don't wash the tubing right, I could get bacteria in my lungs," she says.

Pneumonia is always a danger.

Bed sores or even an over-full catheter bag can lead to a condition called autonomic dysreflexia, which can trigger seizures, stroke and death.

Florence Stephens butters toast and cooks eggs for everyone. Grossman asks Spalti to dip her egg yolk in toast.

"You have to be so patient with everybody," Grossman says. "They have your life in their hands. I used to yell and cry at John Grossman, but it didn't help."

Grossman decided to stay in Paradise Valley after her divorce because the children were settled in their schools.

The small, gracious enclave in sight of the mountains is the essence of the suburban dream. Outside, her daughter, Lauren, sunbathes by the pool in the golden Arizona afternoon while the boys shoot hoops. Spalti has to position her chair so she can see her children.

One cold Saturday afternoon, she sat for hours, bundled in blankets, watching Ronnie, 15, play tennis. She hangs on his every point, as if willing herself into the game.

"Nice, Ronnie, nice!" she says. "Wow, he's getting really good. I'm so proud of him."

Later at dinner, as Spalti feeds her, she listens as Joe, 13, gives her an enthusiastic play-by-play of his lacrosse match.

Grossman and her mother tag-team the children on discipline. Later, they agree that they need to remove the television from Joe's room to cut back on video games.

And there are moments when all remember that this is not quite the suburban dream.

"Cover your mouth with your hand when you sneeze," Florence Stephens scolds Joe. "Do you want to give that cold to your mother?"

"No," he replies, meekly.

She is sound of mind and healthy, but completely paralyzed. If the bullet had struck an inch higher, she would have been brain dead. That much lower, and she might at least have had the use of her arms. She ponders why she is still on this Earth.

"At first, I prayed. I cried. I said to my priest, why did I live? I knew I had died at the scene. I said to him, this life is so hard, how am I going to do this?"

The priest replied, "Heather, there is a purpose for you. You might not know it right now, but you will."

At the time, that was not the answer she wanted. Since then, she has formed her purpose. She is here for her children and to fight against domestic violence. She recently entered the Ms. Wheelchair Arizona pageant and has mentored people with spinal-cord injuries.

"Domestic violence becomes more prevalent every year," she says. "I'm just a victim that didn't die from it."

After all that has happened to her, her blue eyes are dry and clear.

"You never know how strong you are until you're stuck in this situation."