

Local youth injured in surfing accident

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Zachary Abblitt, age 18, of Brookings fractured his C5 and C6 neck vertebrae while surfing with his friend at Sporthaven Beach at the Port of Brookings Harbor on Nov. 20.

“He was pulled from the surf by his friend Daniel (Strom), transported to the local hospital via ambulance and by that evening was flown to Mercy Medical Center in Redding, where he is today,” said his uncle Kevin Knoll. “Zac had no feeling below his neck and was in surgery the day he arrived in Redding to remove part of the two vertebrae that were pinching his spinal column. Doctors also put a plug/fastener in its place to stabilize. The following day he underwent surgery again to have a stabilizing plate put in the back of his neck. He has since regained slight movement in his arms but no movement in his hands and no feeling below his chest.”

Brookings resident Michael Lange was parked at the beach that day while eating his lunch and was watching the two teenage boys playing in the surf, one on a kayak and one on a surfboard.

“It was a ‘shore break’ day, meaning the waves were breaking close to shore as opposed to out further in the water,” Lange said. “I could tell the boys were having a great time, laughing and enjoying the beautiful day and a decent swell, three to four feet on the sets coming in.”

According to Lange, the boys placed the boat and the board up on the beach and ran up to the boardwalk and sea wall area to visit a friend. Meanwhile, a wave came up to the surf toys and started to take one out to the ocean. Two girls who were with the boys were laughing about it.

“At that time, Zac and the other boy, Daniel, ran down the beach to help the girls get the items back up on the beach,” Lange said. “Zac went after the kayak and when the wave receded back into the surf, Zac dove head first in to the shallows. I did not see Zac come up from the dive and then I saw Daniel run to get him; he was struggling to retrieve Zac from the surf.

“Once that happened I jumped out of my car and so did the man parked next to me. I yelled at him to call 911 and ran down to the boys; there was another man running down and also a lady showed up, too. The gentleman who called 911 also came down. We were all in the surf, up to about high shin level, trying to keep Zac’s head above water; he was conscious, but lifeless other than facial expressions.”

The rescuers used the kayak to move Zac to a safer place out of the surf.

“About five of us lifted Zac gently as we could, keeping him as stable as we could, into the kayak,” Lange continued. “I was on his feet end and we all escorted Zac, in the boat, up to the sea wall to wait for first responders.”

“The spot that I dove into was far shallower than I was expecting,” Abblitt said in a video from his hospital bed. “It was about, say less than a foot of water. I hit my head first and was instantly paralyzed after that. Both my C5 and C6 in my neck were crushed. I’ve had surgery in the front and in the back. Now I have a titanium plate back there.”

Zac has been making progress in the days since the accident. At 10 days after his accident, his swelling was still going down, according to Knoll. Zac has full cognitive abilities and can still solve a Rubik’s cube. Although his fingers aren’t cooperating, he continues to practice. In videos of Zac in therapy and discussing his accident, he is smiling and optimistic.

“Everything that Zac is and everything that he always has been has never come out more than in this current circumstance of watching Zac being physically paralyzed and unable to do much,” said his older sister Charis Abblitt, in a heartfelt video to help raise funds.

“Zac’s a fighter so he’s going to push it to get back on his feet, definitely,” said Spencer Abblitt, Zac’s older brother. “We want to get him the quickest route there.”

“Just as he set his mind to learn the piano, and just as he set his mind to surf, and just as he set his mind to be an athlete and a runner, I know that if Zac can be placed in the right rehab center, this will give him all that he needs to take that determination and to put it into him walking again and running again,” Charis said.

“I’m just taking it one day at a time,” Zac said. “I’m excited to see where the Lord’s going to take me and just fully trust in Him. I know this is His will for my life.” Zac’s father is the Pastor at Calvary Heritage Church in Brookings. The family has a very strong faith tradition and community that is helping them through the trauma.

The family is currently applying to different rehab centers for Zac, according to Knoll. They want to place him with the top spinal specialist rehab in the country. The family hopes that rehab will not only be able to work with his ‘muscle memory’ but provide them with the best advice and expertise to guide and direct his treatment. The top rehab centers look for traits that lead to success, such as effort and a willingness to work hard.

“Zac is a fighter and a hard worker,” Knolls said. “He is a strong, athletic young man. We are trying to raise funds for their crazy high medical needs that will be long term,” Knolls said.

The family has set up a fundraising site at "Give Butter" (like GoFundMe) and a Facebook page where people can follow his progress. Here are the links:

<https://givebutter.com/Zac>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/731426521087574>

<https://www.facebook.com/1243639187/videos/10217779294894441/>