

Zac's Hopefest planned September 12

September 10, 2021



Hope. It is what drives all of us. Especially in seasons of great adversity. Nine months ago, Zachary Abblitt was a thriving 18 year old, just having graduated from high school, active with cross country running, biking, surfing, swimming, working out in the gym, playing the piano and bass guitar... until a miscalculated dive into the Brookings harbor ocean on November 20 broke his neck and rendered him paralyzed from the chest down. If anyone was in need of hope, it would have been Zachary.

Yet, one week post-accident, he declared from his hospital bed, bound in neck brace, saying, “I’m fully trusting in the Lord. I know this is His will for my life, and although it may seem confusing at first, I’m excited to see how He is going to use me.”

His family created the hashtag #zacsHope to keep friends updated on his progress. His uncle created a web page, www.ZacsHope.com, and a Facebook page, Zachary Abblitt Recovery, which quickly gained over 1,300 followers. Zachary’s hope was polarizing as updates and pictures of Zachary poured in from his mom, Kristi, who began to journal though his journey.

“As the classification ‘quadriplegic’ began to be used by doctors about Zac,” Kristi explained, “my heart would just seize up. Yet I would quickly find myself choking out a whisper, ‘But God, You have the Final Word in Zachary’s life.’”

Throughout the long, initial month at Mercy Hospital in Redding, Calif., Zachary was often seen laughing with his siblings and friends via video chats as they observed his new weaknesses, such as trying to feed himself. “I believe he laughs because he is living in faith,” his mom, Kristi, observed. “He knows God lives in him and is working His power through his weaknesses. He does not seem afraid of them. But even if he is, more than being whole, he wants God to be glorified in his life.”

The momentum of Hope continued a month later, as Zachary was accepted into Craig Hospital for rehab, recognized as one of the top spinal cord rehabilitation centers in the nation. His family cheered him on with a video they created for his acceptance into Craig.

“Zac is a fighter,” his brother Spencer commented, “and he is gonna do everything he can do get back on his feet.”

“Everything Zac is, and everything he has been has never come out more than in this current circumstance of watching Zac being physically paralyzed...” his sister Charis explained. “But just as Zac has set his mind to learn the piano, to surf, to be an athlete and a runner... this [rehab] will give him all that he needs to put that same determination in to waking again and running again...”

Hope came in many ways at Craig Hospital. His day was packed with therapy session in which he had to re-learn the simplest of daily tasks, such as brushing his teeth. When he found he could begin to wiggle his small toe, he was able to access state-of-the-art equipment such as the Lokomat, a robot-assisted waking therapy machine.

After weeks of an Upper Extremities class, where electric stimulation was hooked up to his wrists and fingers, he felt his right-hand thumb come “alive.” “God gave me back a thumb!” he later told his family on a phone call.

When asked how he could be so strong through all of this, Zachary was quick to reply, “It’s my faith in God. He’s my firm foundation...when everything is stripped away. It’s been incredible to see that through the fire, He’s been there the entire time. I’d rather walk through the fire with God than be in the world alone without Him.”

Day after day, therapy at Craig Hospital brought new Hope. “It’s like Christmas every day,” Zachary laughed, “as I wait to see what new body part the Lord is gonna unlock for me.” New hope continued to come, such as the moment Zachary’s running shoes were put back on his unfeeling feet - feet that used to run a half marathon per week - in order to get him lifted into a standing position again. Or Hope as his motionless legs were connected to electric stimulation to pedal a bike. Hope as he went back into the waters, the source of his accident, and learned to swim again in Craig Hospital's therapy pool.

Month after month, his mom Kristi remained by his side. “Every time I see Zachary, he is smiling,” she observed. “‘The joy of the Lord’ is not just a feel-good verse. It is truly evident in Zacs heart that the Lord is keeping him strengthened because he has absolute confidence in God. He doesn’t question God. He isn’t fearful of the future. He trusts that the Lord is in control and that He is leading him. God’s joy upon him.”

As well, Zachary’s father and pastor of Calvary Heritage in Brookings-Harbor, Rich Abblitt, noted Zachary’s joy: “Everyone wants what Zachary found - joy in the spirit and freedom in Christ. That the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not yet seen is the Lord’s story being written regarding the life of Zac who dared to surrender with no apprehension, has no regrets but joyous anticipation that God will answer him and whatever he asks for he has pleased the Lord to bring Him glory!”

In June, after being gone from home for 206 days, Zachary finally returned to Brookings and to the harbor beach where it all began. Back home. Back to the piano which Zac used to practice for hours. Back to the running shoes he used to wear. Back to his bass guitar he used to play. Back to his surfboard that started it all.... Returning to home in a wheelchair was a great challenge, but Zachary’s courage did not surprise his younger brother Everest, who had been his cross-country running partner.

“Although it’s been incredible to see how Zac has taken all this since day one,” Everest observed, “The strength of his faith in our God is not something that just happened ‘overnight’. The same strength was there before the injury. It just got put to the test...and he has taken it as I know God would want him to.”

And the inspiration has been widespread. Letters, emails, and Facebook posts of encouragement continued to pour in from family, friends, the community, and across the nation. One Facebook comment reads, “You go home with prayers from the thousands of people who have been praying for you.” And another comment says, “Although difficult I am sure, thank you for sharing this journey. I have followed it from the beginning and through it, I have grown as a person. Your son is an amazing young man. I watched every video posted and always saw his determination and never saw tears, always a smile. He has been a true inspiration to me as an adult.”

Locals Michael and Jill Lange were also greatly touched by Zachary. For Michael, it was very personal, as he found himself on the beach the day of Zachary’s accident and ended up helping to pull him from the surf. After months of following Zachary’s progress, the idea of a Hopefest was born, and with it, an opportunity for Zachary to share with the community his story of Hope.

Michael and Jill, together with other members Brookings Nazarene and Calvary Heritage, began to put into motion the planning of Zacs Hopefest, which will take place at Azalea Park this September 12 from 1-4 p.m.

Michael explains his motivation behind the Hopefest.

“Our community is reeling right now from the onslaught of an epidemic and all of the ripple effects associated with that, and we want to share that there is Victory in Christ, no matter how impaired our physical stature is, or becomes, the greater miracle is the gift of Salvation. No better example of testimony of

this, in our area at least, is that of Zachary Abblitt. My desire for HopeFest is to see hearts turned to the Cross and lives changed by way of God's Holy Spirit working through Zac's testimony, in addition to a blessing of resources for the Abblitt family to assist in weathering the perpetual financial challenges."

As plans for the Hopefest continue to progress, the planning team is expecting it to be a large community event and is working with local businesses and community members for event sponsorships and to collect items for a silent auction and raffle. If you are interested in assisting in any way, please email Jill Lange at jill@thelangeteam.com

With this journey for Zachary just passing the ninth month marker, much of the battle still lies ahead. By September 4, the Abblitts need to be moved out of the home they have been renting as the owners of the house are putting it up for sale. Though timing is difficult, the tri-level home is less than ideal for Zachary's needs now. Their hope is to purchase a home locally in which they can remodel to make accessible for Zachary.

But for all Zachary Abblitt has been through, he still explains, "I wouldn't describe this as a trial. It hasn't felt like one. A trial is circumstance with no hope. Where things feel out of control."

For Zachary not to consider his paralysis a trial is mystifying to the mind, until you come hang out with him, and you hear him laugh, and you see his peace, and his joy, and his trust in the goodness of God's deep love for him. And suddenly Zachary's story makes perfectly good sense.

"God is in control and it's just that simple," Kristi journals. "Indeed, #zacsHope is Jesus and that makes all the difference in the world."