

Family Learns Lessons in Coping from People and Animals

BY KATHY J. EDWARDS, PHD

When 6-year-old Lane Duckworth was accidentally burned by a candle on December 30, 1997, life changed forever for the entire Duckworth family. Everyone played a role in her recovery including her parents, three siblings, extended family, a menagerie of pets, and a horse named "Bud."

On the night of the accident, Lane was playing with her 8-year-old brother, Latham, just before going to bed. She was wearing her father's t-shirt, which hung down almost to the floor. She got near a candle and the hem of the shirt caught on fire. She was scared and began to run. Her brother got her out of the house and rolled her in the snow to put the fire out. His quick actions probably saved her life, but he has struggled with the trauma of seeing his sister on fire.

At the time of the accident Lane's father, Tom Duckworth, was working in the barn. Her mother,



Ann Duckworth brings an unusual visitor to see Lane.

Ann, had gone to a neighbor's house. She was only gone 15 minutes. Lane's sister Tory, 12, was on the phone upstairs. Her oldest brother Colton, 15, was not home.

Latham took Lane to the barn and he and Tom poured water on her. Tory called 911. Ann returned home and saw smoke coming out of the house. She thought the smoke was coming from the wood stove. When she entered the house she heard Tory explaining to the dispatcher that her sister had been in an accident and had a burn injury.

Lane was taken by helicopter to Bronson Hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She sustained second and third degree burns to 85% of her body. For the first few weeks the family and her medical team weren't sure if Lane would survive the accident.

BURNS AFFECT THE ENTIRE FAMILY

Tom Duckworth felt completely helpless the first few days Lane was in the hospital. He wished he could trade places with his daughter. Ann Duckworth felt the uncertainty was the hardest part during the first few days.

Ann and Tom processed their feelings differently. "We never talked together about the fact that Lane might die," Ann said. "At one point, briefly, I let it go through my mind. What funeral home should we call? But I put those thoughts aside pretty quickly. Most of the time I thought we really wouldn't lose her." When Tom talked to the doctor he asked questions like, "Is she going to make it? What are her chances?" Ann was thinking about how this would affect Lane's life beyond the initial crisis. She even asked questions like, "Can Lane still have children?"

One of the difficult things for Ann and Tom Duckworth to manage was taking care of Lane and also the other children at home. Lane was treated in the pediatric ICU at Bronson for three and one-half months. "I almost feel like the other kids got put on hold," Tom explains. "At first we farmed them out to other family members." Ann remembers that two days after the accident she and Tom returned home to get some things, told the other kids their sister probably wasn't going to make it, and then left to go back to the hospital. In hindsight they realize they left the other children with very distressing news and no one to talk to.

During the first few weeks Tom and Ann Duckworth stayed at the hospital almost all the time. When Lane became less critical they started taking turns. Siblings Latham, Tory, and Colton visited the hospital often. Tory spent a lot of nights at the hospital, too. As Lane's condition improved, Tom and Ann started taking turns at the hospital, sending the other parent home to spend time with the kids at home.

The Duckworths live on a farm and have always loved animals. With the help of most of the nurses and at least one surgeon, they "smuggled" a number of animals in to visit Lane in the pediatric ICU. Ann is a strong advocate of pet therapy. "Animals can help sometimes when people cannot." The Duckworths keep a photo album documenting Lane's hospitalization and recovery. The photos show a baby goat, rabbits, dogs, and cats visiting Lane in the hospital.

HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL

After three and one-half months, Lane's condition improved to the point that she was discharged from Bronson and moved to a rehabilitation center. "She was at a rehab center but they didn't have a clue how to take care of her. We brought her home early on because she wasn't doing well in the hospital," Ann explains. After they brought Lane home she started improving rapidly.

Ann Duckworth remembers driving a lot between the two hospitals and home to pick up wound care supplies and take Lane to physical therapy. Tom recalls that he rarely got enough sleep.

Her siblings played a big role in Lane's recovery when she came home from the hospital. Colton did diaper changes for Lane. Tory helped by staying with Lane at night so her parents could get some rest. Most of the family activities had to be planned around Lane's care. That was hard for everyone, parents and siblings alike.

The hardest thing for Tom and Ann, as well as

Lane, was physical therapy. Her parents did her therapy and stretches. It was hard to watch their daughter go through so much pain. "Lane was off medication by this time," Ann said. "That's why to Lane physical therapy was harder than dressing changes. She was an 85% burn. Every joint had a burn and had to be stretched." It took an hour just to get Lane ready for bed because she had to have splints on all her joints.

Ann and Tom feel their faith was an important part of the healing process. "When Lane came home, our faith in God's healing and guidance in our lives was what we believe truly has gotten us to where we are today." They are grateful for Lane's amazing recovery. "There were things that happened that, by medical standards, were just not in the books for how it should be. Lane is Bronson hospital's biggest surviving burn and also her surgeon's biggest surviving burn," Ann said. "We had a wonderful burn team, but it went higher than that."

A FOUR-LEGGED THERAPIST NAMED BUD

Animals again played a role in Lane's recovery. Lane has always loved horses so her parents came up with the idea of using them to help her stretch. Some nights she cried. Some nights she said never again. But most nights she enjoyed it and wanted to do a little extra.

Bud is a stocky plow horse. Her parents laid a towel over his back and put Lane on her back and her sides to help her stretch. "Bud stood with no one holding him, listening to the yelling, and never even switched his tail," Tom said.

When Lane rode Bud her parents walked alongside to keep her safe. As she improved they bought a smaller horse named Reno. "Although Bud is wonderful, he is a little much for Lane to ride alone. He's just too powerful," according to Ann. "So this is where Reno comes in. He is perfect for Lane. I feel very safe with him and he does all Lane asks of him. Her horses have been great therapy for her."

Lane set a goal while she was in the hospital. One day she told her astonished family, "When I get out of here I'm going to play soccer." Her parents didn't think Lane had ever played soccer before her accident. They couldn't imagine how she could ever play soccer after such a devastating injury. Ann recalls, "At first we said, we'll see." It took a lot of hard work from Lane, her family, and her four-legged therapist, but she eventually reached a point that her progress improved more quickly. One day her parents found themselves asking, "Where can we get soccer equipment."

Lane shares this advice with other children who have experienced a burn injury, “Try to be happy you’re alive. It gets over with quicker than you would think.” Although physical therapy was the hardest part for Lane, she is glad she got through it. “Do what people tell you to do even if it hurts, because soon you will be running around like a normal kid again.”

LEARNING TO ASK FOR HELP

The Duckworth family had a wonderful support network of extended family and friends. Tom was able to take three months off from his concrete business because his brother stepped in and took charge of day-to-day affairs. Tom’s brothers went in together and bought the family a new furnace.

It was hard for Tom and Ann to let others help them. “When this first happened we thought we didn’t need people’s help,” Tom said. “It exhausted us trying to do everything. We had to learn to ask for help.” Ann adds, “After the accident we were amazed at how many people helped us. We had a good support system from our church. All kinds of people brought food or did something, even people we didn’t know very well.” The fire department in Bellevue, Michigan, where Tom is a volunteer firefighter, put on a pancake breakfast and raised \$10,000 towards Lane’s treatment. Stores in Battle Creek and Bellevue put out collection boxes to raise money for her care.

Because so many people were touched by Lane’s story, she got a lot of attention and presents from people in the community. This turned out to be a mixed blessing. It helped Lane get through the ordeal, but sometimes made it harder on the rest of the family. “I can’t stop people from being kind to Lane. I wouldn’t want to try,” Ann explains. “But it’s hard for the other kids to understand sometimes why Lane gets so many toys or stuffed animals and they don’t.” Tom and Ann tried to be fair with all the children, while also doing what they needed to do to take care of Lane. Finding the right balance was not always easy.

A HUMAN THERAPIST NAMED MEGAN

Each member of the Duckworth family has struggled with lingering feelings since that fateful night. A year and a half after the accident the family began working with Megan Bronson, RN, MSN, CS, a nurse psychotherapist specializing in grief and trauma issues. They met Megan at the Great Lakes Burn Camp the first year Lane attended. One of the things Megan noticed is that while Lane seemed to have made a fairly normal adjustment to a severe injury, her brother Latham seemed to be struggling in silence.

Shortly after the accident Latham was given the “Junior Firefighter Award” by the Bellevue Fire Department in Michigan for his quick thinking to stop, drop, and roll when Lane’s clothing was on fire. As the first responder on the scene, Latham was struggling with post traumatic stress. “At this point in time, Latham is struggling more than any of us,” Ann explains. “He saw her on fire. They are very close, they were before the accident, but they’re even closer now.”

Latham is working on his feelings with Megan. He has attended the Great Lakes Burn Camp in Kalamazoo, Michigan, with his sister. The camp has been an important part of helping him heal from the trauma he experienced as the only witness to the accident. Latham shares an insight he has learned through therapy, “You have to accept what has happened. You can’t deny it.”

During the four years since the accident, Ann has struggled with feelings of guilt. “I left the house and she was burned. I’m the one who lit the candles.” Recently she has been able to shed some of that guilt by working with Megan one-on-one. Another thing that helped was meeting other parents at the World Burn Congress. She found comfort in hearing others talk about their experiences. It helped her realize, “Things do happen. You’re human.”

Each member of the Duckworth family is processing their feelings at their own pace. “Just the other day Tory and I talked about her feelings about the accident,” Ann said. “She feels guilt, too. She was in charge when I left.” Ann and Tory are surprised to find they are still actively discussing their feelings four years after the accident. So far Tory has not been ready to talk to Megan. She has tried to work through the issues on her own.

Tory struggled with the fact that for at least two years, everything seemed to be about Lane. Both parents acknowledge that Tory was a big help in taking care of Lane after the accident. They couldn’t have made it without her help. Ann and Tom have tried to balance the extra attention Lane has received from so many people. “It’s hard looking back,” Ann said. “We’ve had a couple of years of normalcy since the accident. That has helped.” Tory shares some advice for siblings of other burn survivors, “Be patient with them, be protective of them. Be understanding of what they have been through.”

Colton was not home at the time of the accident, but one day he told his parents he is very angry. “I don’t know at who, or why, I’m just very mad,” he said. Colton is still working to sort out the reasons why. He

advises other siblings, "It's bad but you have to deal with it. Don't be jealous of people giving more attention to the burn survivor."

LIFE AFTER A BURN INJURY

Four years after her burn injury, 10-year-old Lane Duckworth plays soccer, rides horses, and makes friends easily. She has played on an indoor soccer team for two years. Her parents are looking into an outdoor league for next year. She took a fall on her horse once, which was harder for her parents than for Lane. Ann explains, "It really scared me, but she got back on the horse and she was fine. I have had to learn how to let her do things like that." Lately Lane has been talking about playing hockey.

Before the accident Lane was in home schooling. After the accident she wanted to go back to school. Ann remembers the first time Lane asked to go over and meet a group of kids. She had just gotten out of the hospital, and was wearing bandages from head to toe. Ann was afraid the other kids wouldn't accept her daughter. She didn't need to be afraid. "Lane is very settled in who she is. She will go over and play with kids. She starts talking to them and makes friends. She isn't afraid to tell others what happened to her." Lane's attitude is, "This is who I am."

Tom Duckworth shares this advice with parents of burn injured children, "Encourage them to do normal kid stuff. Don't hide them away. Lane doesn't seem to have a hard time. If so, we never see it. It doesn't seem that the other kids are teasing her or giving her a bad time." The hospital did a re-entry program before Lane went back to school. Each year Ann gives a brief version of the program to the new kids at the school.

Ann and Tom are finding ways to share the insight they have gained from this experience with other parents and burn survivors. They started a support group in Kalamazoo and they shared their experiences as part



Lane and Bud share a quiet moment.

of a panel with Megan Bronson and Joe Mlakar, MD, at this year's World Burn Congress. They have been trained through the Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery (SOAR) program to become peer support volunteers for Spectrum Health Care in Grand Rapids. This fall Lane visited a boy in the burn unit as a peer supporter. She decided the best way to encourage him would be to give him a soccer ball. He had a big smile when she brought the ball into his room. The Duckworths are making a video to tell their story and help other families who have experienced a burn injury. They are grateful for their daughter's second chance at life and the lessons they have learned from their children, their support network of family and friends, a therapist named Megan, and a horse named Bud.



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The Phoenix Society, Inc. • 1835 R W Berends Dr. SW • Grand Rapids, MI 49519-4955 • 800.888.BURN • www.phoenix-society.org

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