

## Surviving Against All Odds

BY KATHY J. EDWARDS, PHD

On May 30, 1998, Patty Tweedle's family gathered around her hospital bed in Springfield, Missouri wondering if she would live through the night. Doctors were giving her only a 10% chance of surviving burns to 86% of her body from a fire caused by a propane explosion.

John Tweedle, Patty's former husband, brought the couple's two children Sarah, 10, and Jacob, 9, to see their mother. Her parents, Frank and Jeanine Emma flew in from Las Vegas.

Jacob remembers that the bandages made his mother look like she was in a body cast. The only parts he could see were her face, which was red and swollen well beyond normal size, and her toes that "looked black and had some skin missing." Sarah Tweedle recalls that her mother was hooked up to so many tubes her head "looked like a plate of spaghetti."

Patty was barely conscious. She couldn't talk to her loved ones because she was hooked up to a respirator and she had a trachea tube. With an alphabet board she painstakingly spelled the words, "I love you," with her bandaged hands. Three generations of her family fought back tears as they said their goodbyes, not knowing if it would be for the last time. The most vivid memory for Frank Emma was hearing his 9-year-old grandson Jacob ask, "Grandma, who will take care of us if mommy dies?"

Patty lived through the night and was flown by helicopter to the burn unit at the University of Missouri in Columbia the next day. An uncanny chain of events lead to her transport. A few weeks before Patty's accident, Frank Emma read an article about how a new skin replacement product was creating hope for patients with large burns. He saw the article in an airline magazine while flying home from a business trip. "It's not the kind of article I would ordinarily read," Frank explained. He had no

way of knowing that a few weeks later the information from that article would help save his daughter's life.

Because Patty's injury was so large, she had very little skin left for grafting. At first the only option presented to the family was to create cloned skin, a process that takes several weeks. When the family asked about the skin replacement they were told the local hospital had never worked with it before but there were doctors at the university hospital that could help. Patty was transferred the next day and under the care of Dr. Boyd Terry, her body was patched together with a combination of donor skin from her scalp and Integra, a skin replacement product.

### "IT WAS LIKE WATCHING A CLOCK"

Patty Tweedle was in the hospital in Columbia for four months. Three of the four months she was in a medically induced coma. Her parents rented an apartment in Columbia and maintained a daily vigil at the hospital. John and the kids drove up from Branson to visit on weekends.

The medical team didn't hold out much hope for the family. It was about ten weeks before one of the nurses said, "I think she's going to make it." Family members sat at the hospital for long periods at a time with no sign of change in Patty's condition. John recalls, "It was like watching a clock."

Frank and Jeanine Emma began each day by calling the burn unit in the morning to check on Patty's progress and find out when they could visit. Most days they got in to see her twice. They took long walks in between to maintain their sanity.

At first the children weren't allowed in to the burn unit to see Patty. On day 17 of her hospital stay the family was summoned to her bedside. Patty had sepsis. Just about everything that could go wrong did. Her heart stopped, her lungs collapsed, kidneys failed.



*The Tweedle family—Jacob, Patty, John and Sarah.*

Patty's dad called John and told him to bring the kids in to say goodbye. As they drove to the hospital they prayed and sang hymns. Once they got there she was doing a little better.

After day 17 Sara and Jacob were allowed to visit Patty regularly in the burn unit. They came every weekend. They recorded songs and messages such as "Hi, we love you." When they visited they would tell Patty about their day even though she was in a coma. They drew pictures and made things to put in her room.

One of the hardest things for Sarah and Jacob was trying to remain positive and upbeat when they were in the hospital room. Sarah explains, "If your family member thinks you're upset they may think they are dying. When I was upset the other members of the family would ask me to leave the room." She advises other children who may be visiting an injured parent, "Keep yourself together. If you can keep yourself calm it gives hope to the other person."

## AN UNUSUAL PROPOSAL

When Patty came out of the coma, about three months after the accident, it took a couple of weeks to orient herself and understand what had happened. At first she had a hard time separating the morphine dreams from reality. She remembered the explosion and the fire. The rest was foggy.

Her family "spoon fed" her information at first. She learned about the 12 skin graft surgeries and that her gall bladder had been removed. Patty was grateful for the way her family shared the news. "If they had told me that all at once I couldn't have handled it."

When Patty first came out of the coma she couldn't talk because of the trach. As she looked at the faces of her loving family one thing was clear. John, her ex-husband, had been there by her side all this time. She looked into his eyes and mouthed the words, "Marry me." He said "yes" and everyone in the room cried tears of joy.

For Patty and John the accident was the catalyst that brought them back together. John explains, "Sometimes when a thing like this happens it helps you realize what's really important. People, relationships are really important. In a situation like this people realize that you don't always get a second chance." Patty adds, "We always loved each other but we had a lot of growing up to do." John and Patty got remarried on October 23, 1999.

## RELEARNING ALMOST EVERYTHING

When Patty was awakened from the coma, the family was elated. Their joy was short-lived when they saw how much work was involved in the rehabilitation phase. "For a long time I couldn't walk or talk or breathe or feed myself," Patty explains. "It was frustrating as hell to have to call the nurse in to take the little foil off the piece of jam." But all that frustration made Patty work harder to relearn how to do things for herself.

She had dark days where she would cry uncontrollably. She could see her kids but she couldn't hold them close. Sometimes when John and the kids came on weekends Patty would have to tell them she was having a dark day. "Just holding my hand was enough for them," Patty explains. She marvels at their courage, "I don't know how I'd do if the tables were turned."

One of the biggest shocks for Patty was learning that she was bald. Her head had been shaved so skin from her scalp could be used for skin grafts. "That was the worst part of all, not having any hair," Patty jokes. When Patty saw herself for the first time after the accident she told the nurse, "I look like a tennis ball." The nurses in the burn unit were very supportive. "They brought me stacks of hair magazines and every time they saw someone with a cute short hair cut they brought them in the room to show me," Patty explains..

Shortly before discharge, Jeanine Emma learned how to help Patty bathe, change her dressings and put on the Jobst suit. One of the toughest lessons was learning when to help and when to let Patty struggle to do things on her own.

Patty remembers how shocked she was the first time Jeanine asked her to help with the dishes. Jeanine explains, "Patty balked a little, but then she did that when she was 13, too." Patty admires her mother for the courage she showed during that time and realizes that her successful recovery was due in part to being asked to do more and more things for herself.

## HEALING THE EMOTIONAL WOUNDS

Patty Tweedle credits her support system of family, friends, and the hospital staff with helping her make it through the dark days during rehab. Together they celebrated every milestone--the first step, the first breath, the first time she was able to wear regular clothes or shoes. "Every little victory helped me see where I was headed," Patty explains.

Along with the physical and emotional challenges of rehabilitation, Patty had to learn to live with a new appearance. That was very hard, especially at first. She hated being bald and in a Jobst suit.

The accident forced Patty to get better in touch with herself minus the physical side. It was hard to reestablish an intimate relationship with John. After she first went home from the hospital, Patty described herself as "a swamp thing." It took her almost a year to get over feeling that way about herself. Her attitude changed as her physical condition continued to improve and also when she began interacting with others who lived through a burn injury.

Her first encounter with other burn survivors came in the spring of 1999, about eight months after her accident, when she discovered the website for Burn Survivors Online. Patty feels that being able to go beyond herself and reach out to others helped complete her healing. "You have to be OK with yourself before you can honestly from the heart successfully help someone else," she explains. Patty corresponded with other burn survivors on the Internet as they overcame some of their fears about showing their scars in public. She learned that "healing happens."

Patty, John, Sarah and Jacob attended the World Burn Congress in San Francisco in July 2000. It was a turning point for all of them. They met others who had been through similar experiences. John continually reassured Patty that he still found her attractive. When she went to the World Burn Congress and met other people with burn scars, it was easier to believe him. It helped that other people thought she was attractive, too.



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## NEW AND IMPROVED FAMILY LIFE

Upon first meeting, the casual observer would never guess how close Patty Tweedle came to dying during the summer of 1998. Patty is a positive, vibrant, caring person. Her wounds have healed and she is pleased with the results of the grafts using Integra.

Almost four years after the accident, life is good for the Tweedle family. They just moved into a new home. Patty is producing and managing her husband's show in Branson, Missouri. She plays a little golf, is involved in community politics, works to support burn-related causes, and loves to read.

Patty encourages other burn survivors with the same advice a favorite nurse gave to her, "Your season will change. Keep moving forward. Setbacks will happen, but don't focus on them." She reminds burn survivors, "The surgeon can't do it all. You need to play an active part in your own recovery."

John Tweedle believes the most important lesson he learned through Patty's accident and recovery is to treat every day as a blessing. He explains, "Sometimes I do something stupid or we irritate one another. Then I think *You fool. Look what you've got.*"

Sarah Tweedle reflects on how the accident has changed her relationship with her mom "There are a lot of things a girl goes thru from the ages of 10-14. It would be a lot harder to go thru those things without my mom," Sarah explains thoughtfully. "I have a lot of friends who fight with their moms. I've only had one argument with my mom in the last three years. I have more respect for her now. I appreciate her more, knowing I could lose her at anytime."

Jacob Tweedle has more respect for fire than he did before. He also helps his mom more around the house. He encourages other children whose parents suffer a burn injury to "look past the scars and the swelling to see that the person inside hasn't changed."

Frank and Jeanine Emma recently took John and Patty on a cruise to celebrate their remarriage. As they look at the photos from the cruise they can't help remembering that day in the hospital in May 1998 and marveling at how far they have come together as a family.