

Chad Bianchi's spirit hasn't let him down

Written by News Desk

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Photo: Chad Bianchi mounted on a horse at the MANE facility. MANE provides equestrian-based therapy and helped Chad in his struggle with medical difficulties.

Photo: Special to The Indy

By BILL RICE, JR. - *The Montgomery Independent*

Everything in Chad Bianchi's life changed on September 11, 2007. 9-11. It's an easy date to remember.

At the time, Bianchi (of Millbrook) was working as an administrative assistant at The Montgomery Cancer Center. He was a recent graduate of the University of Alabama, where he had been a key part of the football team's athletic training staff during the Dennis Franchione and Mike Shula years at the Capstone.

Bianchi's life was normal as could be. In high school, he had been very active in student affairs at Alabama Christian Academy. He also played football and participated in track and field where he threw the shot putt.

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A huge Alabama fan, he'd never even bothered applying to school anywhere else. He worked his way through school as a trainer for the football team. A health management major, he was in charge of logistics for the training staff, helping take care of thousands of details of preparing for practices and games.

During two-a-days in the summer, he said it was not uncommon for him to work 15 hour days - from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.

He accompanied the team to all the games and became friends with plenty of players and of course all of the other student trainers and managers.

His last game as a trainer was in December 2006 at the Independence Bowl.

On September 11, 2007, he was five years removed from his high school days at ACA and had a bright future in his field (he was interviewing for jobs at major medical facilities around the country).

But he felt bad on that day and decided to leave early to go stay with his grandmother whose home was not far from the Cancer Center.

"I just went over there to lie down and rest," he said. His mother happened to see his car and dropped in to check on him.

She knew right away something wasn't right and insisted he go to the emergency room. For his part, Chad knew he had an appointment with an ENT doctor that week and was going to wait for that appointment to see if the doctor could tell him why he was feeling weak and not like himself.

More specifically, he'd noticed that his balance was off and he could tell he was slightly slurring some words when he spoke. He was admitted to the hospital, tests were run, but no diagnosis

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was forthcoming. A couple of days later he was transported by ambulance to UAB's Medical Center. Again, more tests and no firm diagnosis.

But his symptoms were "snowballing - everything was happening at an accelerated pace," he said.

It was known that something was happening within or to his brain, but tests (including a brain biopsy) remained "inconclusive."

In the matter of hours, Chad Bianchi's life had changed. He now needed almost around the clock medical care. His life became measured by hospital stays - Montgomery hospitals, UAB and Spain Rehab in Birmingham, Johns Hopkins in Maryland, HealthSouth. He went from ICU units to regular rooms to rehab hospitals to out patient status.

He remembers "playing the waiting game" and spending "six weeks or so" in different hospitals.

His speech had deteriorated rapidly and his balance was worse than ever. One low point he vividly remembers was when he was given a walker.

As alarming as his sudden deterioration in health was, an even greater source of frustration was that specialists could not pinpoint the exact cause of his condition. Even today, it's not exactly understood what has caused his symptoms. At one time, doctors thought he had a rare form of cancer. Even today all he can say is that that he has a condition that has caused his cerebellum to swell and, as a result, he has lost brain cells.

In the six-plus years since his health has been impaired, he's also battled one lawsuit dealing with coverage of health bills. Today - with his medical bills no doubt totalling in the millions - he relies on Medicaid for health coverage. He's grateful for this coverage, but does note that it puts limits on his treatment options. For example, he can no longer travel to out-of-state facilities.

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Today, Chad Bianchi is doing far better than he was in his worst days. For starters, he can stay at home by himself (he lives in his own apartment-type space downstairs at his mother and stepfather's home in Millbrook).

He can't drive and he still relies on a walker. If he has a long way to travel, he will use a wheel chair if only because he doesn't want his slow pace of travel to be an inconvenience to those he is with.

He speaks slowly and his words still sound slurred, not unlike others who have suffered some form of brain injury.

However, a visitor will soon glean that Bianchi's cognitive abilities have NOT been impaired. His vocabulary and sentence structure reveal a highly educated, bright, thoughtful person.

"People hear me speak and they probably think my cognitive abilities have been effected," he said.

Indeed, Bianchi seems intent on proving to himself and others that his mind is as sharp as ever.

One way he proved this was by enrolling in an MBA program at the University of Phoenix, the country's best known on-line education program.

He graduated with his MBA, making only one B, the rest A's.

At the time, he said he felt that all he was doing was eating, sleeping and watching TV.

"I felt like I was in the prime years of my life and I wasn't doing anything constructive," he said of his motivation to earn his Master's degree.

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Bianchi, you see, was determined to live as independent a life as possible.

His religious faith - always present - has grown "significantly deeper" since his ordeal began, he said.

Anyone who spends anytime with Chad is immediately struck by his positive, upbeat attitude and his determination to do everything possible to improve his quality of life and his long-term prognosis.

"There's so many more things I can do today," he said.

He admits that there have been low points and bouts with depression, but his natural fighting spirit and his growing faith have kept such low moments to a minimum.

His family - from parents to grandparents and step-parents - have been a rock of support, he says.

While his slow speech is the most noticeable manifestation of his condition, he can and does benefit from technology to communicate as effectively as ever through texts, emails and word-processors. And, actually, his speech is far better than many people who have endured brain injuries.

After Chad completed his MBA in health management, Chad needed another project to occupy his time.

He decided to write a book about two topics he knew as well as anyone - his experiences as a trainer for Alabama's football team and his experiences dealing with a serious health condition.

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Last month he published the book "Crimson Dream." Most of the book focuses on his experiences as a behind the scenes support person with Alabama football. However, he also chronicles the health issues he's dealt with, providing a testament to the power of his unshakable religious faith and amazing determination.

"I wanted to write down these stories and share some of my memories before I forgot them," said Bianchi of his UA experiences he still cherishes.

Forty percent of all proceeds from the book are going to the on-going Tornado relief efforts.

Bianchi is also becoming a spokesperson of sorts for MANE, a Montgomery non-profit which uses horses for physical and mental therapy. Wrote Chad about his initial experiences receiving once a week therapy at the MANE facility:

"MANE has apparently been the 'best kept secret' in Montgomery ... After ending my latest round of traditional physical therapy, I inquired about an equine-assisted form, subsequently my therapist suggested the aforementioned facility. It had been several years since I had been on horseback, but the staff and volunteers were nothing short of remarkable. Any apprehensions (mentally, emotionally, etc.) I felt on my first day of therapy, were quickly eased by the caring individuals and animals at MANE.

"In my short time there, I have discovered and taken advantage of muscles not previously used. Sometimes, these muscles are a little sore, but it reminds me of the 'good sore' felt after a workout. I seem to be moving and speaking better, and I really enjoy MANE as a sport as well as the interaction with the horses, instructors and volunteers. I can't wait to see my progression, once my time at MANE has come to a close."

A common theme of football or sports books is "never give up." Sports, it has been said, don't form character, they reveal it.

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The life story of Chad Bianchi is certainly far more inspiring than, say, any account of a come-from-behind football game. It's a story that reveals that life doesn't always go the way you'd expect or wish. But how some people deal with hardship - and how some people live their lives with the hopes of positively effecting others - is a story that really matters and one that has the potential to inspire others.

It's hard to imagine a more compelling and inspiring story than Chad Bianchi's.

Note: For more information on Chad's book or to reserve copies in time for Christmas, visit: www.TheCrimsonDream.com.

E-books are just \$3.99; paperbacks are \$19.99 and hardback versions are \$29.99.