

Maryland Youth Struggles For Life Following Three Wheeler Accident

Editor's Note: Farm accidents are all too common, with agriculture ranking as the second most hazardous occupation in the United States. Many of those injured are children like Robbie Smith, who is featured in the following story. His tragedy is a reminder that preventive safety measures are essential. During Farm Safety Week, Sept. 21 to 27, make your children and family aware of how important safety is.

BY SHARON SCHUSTER
Maryland Correspondent

March 9 — "My beautiful, healthy son went for a ride — a short time later he was on his way to shock trauma in a chopper..."

So begins Mary Ellen Smith's account of her son Robbie's struggle to stay alive. "I had started keeping a log," said Smith, "just to get my feelings out. Then I thought Robbie might want to read it some day."

The spiral bound handwritten account of the Smiths' ordeal refers to the three wheeler accident that left their 14-year-old son in a coma that has lasted six months. It seems like 60 years," she said. It was "the worst nightmare that I or my family has ever been through," wrote Mrs. Smith. "The first week is almost a blur of feelings, facts, fears, hopes, and lots of prayers."

As a passenger on a three wheeled cycle, Robbie Smith, along with the driver of the "tryke" was involved in an accident that left Smith's 16-year-old friend with a concussion (he was treated and released), and rendered Smith totally incapacitated and unconscious from the moment of impact. Smith's cousin who observed the tragedy ran for help. A helicopter arrived soon after the 2 p.m. accident and transported the unconscious and profusely bleeding boy to Baltimore's Shock-Trauma Center.

"The first week we weren't sure Robbie would live through each day," continues Mrs. Smith's journal. "We never imagined in our wildest imaginations that it could last this long," she said of her son's unconsciousness.

Smith said that most of her son's injury is to the brain stem. She explained that there are eight stages of consciousness that a person can experience. From the signs that she and her family and doctors have observed, Smith said she would classify Robbie as between stages 2 and 3 (1 being the lowest).

"Sometimes he'll track with his eyes," she explained. When asked questions, he can blink once for "yes" and twice for "no." "I think he's getting bored with the whole thing," she added.

March 21 — "By now I felt as though Robbie was God's child and it was up to God and the doctors to take care of him — all I could do is pray."

Searching out Robbie's freshman picture from Francis Scott Key High School, Smith said her son was healthy and active. His father, Robert added that his son helped with the milking on their dairy farm near New Windsor, and was active in the Key Clovers 4-H Club.

"He was my tractor driver, said Smith. "That's the biggest part that I miss," he added with a smile. Now Robbie rides in a side cart on the tractor. "Sometimes I ride with him," said Mary Ellen Smith. "But there's no seat for Mom."

At the time of the accident, Robbie was planning for the Carroll County, Maryland Fair. His steer waited in the barn for his return, but that was not to happen in time. Mike Arbaugh, a friend of Robbie, continued to groom the animal during Robbie's absence.

Robbie was able to attend the fair, strapped in a wheelchair. His parents hoped that it would be just

the thing to stimulate his mind. But even the excitement of winning the grand champion banner wasn't enough to wake him from his strange sleep.

The school photo revealed a handsome, bright-eyed youngster. In contrast, a photograph taken during his stay at the Kennedy Institute in Baltimore, Md., shows a frail child strapped in a wheelchair. The once strong legs that ran track at Francis Scott Key High School are now rigid and drawn from lying in his comatose state for more than six months.

April 10 — "Robbie finally smiled," continues Smith's diary.

Robert and Mary Ellen Smith and their daughters Catherine and Denise altered their daily routines to accommodate visiting hours, consultations, operations, and therapy schedules.

"I got up earlier in the morning," said Robert Smith. While his son was hospitalized, he began the morning milking at 3:15. "There for a while I was only part-time farming," he said.

He credits Mike Arbaugh for making the transition as smooth as possible. "He has been super," said Smith. "He just took over." Mrs. Smith said they think of Arbaugh "as one of our own."

Faced with mounting medical expenses, the Smiths say insurance will most likely run out before their ordeal is over. Once Robbie has regained consciousness, he will need extensive therapy.

Flipping through the file of medical papers she has compiled, Mrs. Smith plucked out the 30-day Shock-Trauma bill that amounted to more than \$56,000, and was 67 pages long. "It's inevitable," said Smith of incoming bills. "We know they're coming, and it won't stop now that he is home."

Jokingly they said they call him "our million dollar baby." Wiping a tear from her eye, Mrs. Smith



Robbie once helped his father on the family's dairy farm but since the three-wheeler accident, he has been confined to a wheelchair. Here, his mother, Mary Ellen Smith, spends a quiet moment with her disabled son. Inset is a picture of Robbie before the accident.

added, "That's o.k. — whatever it takes."

As soon as word of the tragedy hit the community, friends and organizations rallied around the Smith family to make meals, help with farm work and raise funds for the costs incurred during their nightmarish ordeal. On July 19, several organizations staged an auction to benefit the "Robbie Smith Fund." More than 800 people attended the fundraiser and over \$15,000 was raised that hot, July day at the New Windsor Carnival grounds. Items auctioned ranged from furniture to livestock, and, with three auctioneers, it lasted over eight hours.

The bills are still mounting. Robbie requires round the clock care by hired nurses. A nurse even accompanies him on the school bus and at the Carroll County Exceptional Center where he has just completed the first weeks of school.

He is at the specially equipped facility from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. "I think he sleeps most of the time," said his mother. "It will be good for him to be around other kids," she added.

The Smiths work continually at trying to provide Robbie with physical and emotional stimulation in the hope that they will find the key to unlocking his mind. "We tickle him, pinch his ears, and talk to him constantly."

Mrs. Smith said they are now looking for a van that is equipped or can be equipped with a wheelchair lift. Taking him in the car is "a real chore" that requires several people to load and strap him safely in the car. "If I had a van, I could take him myself," explained Smith.

Smith said that although her

son's mind is at a standstill, he has grown three inches since the March accident. "Now he weighs more than I do. He's a little butterball," she chuckled.

"The people who have called and the churches that have him on their prayer lists," said Mrs. Smith, "the outpouring of love and concern, is just amazing to me."

The Smiths have held an annual fundraising barn dance on their farm for several years to benefit the fire company and St. Paul's United Methodist Church. "We had one scheduled," said Robert Smith, "but we had to cancel." The Smiths aren't sure just which organizations or individuals are now conducting fundraisers for them, but they said "We appreciate it."

May 30 — "Hulk Hogan left his autograph on Robbie's bulletin board."

With Farm Safety week just beginning, Mary Ellen Smith said, "It makes you stop and shake your head," referring to the numbers of farm children who continue to ride three wheelers. She said she would like to see them outlawed, and recommended that riders wear helmets and not carry passengers. "They look safe, but they're not," she warned. "They are killers. Robbie's life is changed forever because of one ride."

June 26 — "We feel things are beginning to happen again."

Describing their ordeal as a "roller coaster full of ups and downs," Mrs. Smith said, "If tears and prayers will get this child through this, he's going to be fine. And victory will be all the sweeter because he has had it so rough." She continued, "I think he's going to come through it. God has pulled him through so much. He's got big plans for Robbie."



Chuck Roop was one of three auctioneers who donated time to conduct the Robbie Smith Benefit Auction. A standing room only crowd filled the pavilion and town councilman Emory Wolfe noted: "When the chips are down, the town is there."



Many items, including these cattle donated by a friend of the family, were auctioned for Robbie's benefit sale.

Homestead Notes