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I-71 accident leaves vehicle impaled by guardrail after crash

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CLEVELAND, OH (WOIO) - Cleveland Police are investigating a one car crash that happened Saturday morning on I-71 South on the W. 25th Street entrance ramp.

It happened around 8 a.m.

Police say when officers arrived, they observed a 2011 Ford Edge that had struck a guardrail, which then impaled the vehicle.

Cleveland Fire responded and extracted the driver, later identified as 36-year-old Amy Vitelli of Amherst.

Vitelli was transported to MetroHealth Medical Center where she's being treated for severe injuries to her left side and leg and is listed in critical condition.

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Driver crashes into guard rail along I-71 at Fulton Road exit

BY: Cassandra Nist, newsnet5.com

POSTED: Nov 24, 2012


UPDATED: 420 days ago



A |  CLEVELAND - An Amherst woman remains in critical condition after a car crash on I-71 and Fulton Saturday morning.

Cleveland Police said the accident happened around 8 a.m. on the West 25th Street entrance ramp to I-71 South.

A 2011 Ford Edge, driven by 36-year-old ~~Amy Vitelli of Amherst, Ohio,~~ had struck a guardrail that impaled the vehicle by going through a side and exiting through the rear window.

A |  The Cleveland Division of Fire responded to extract Vitelli from the vehicle. ~~Vitelli~~ suffered severe injuries to her left side and leg. Cleveland EMS transported her to MetroHealth Medical Center for treatment where she remains at this time.


Cleveland Police are still investigating the cause of the crash, however; the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) crews on scene reported the crash was weather related.

ODOT District 12 will continue to have crews out throughout the evening and into Sunday as needed, in Cuyahoga, Lake & Geauga Counties as a result of freezing temperatures and continued lake effect snow.

Nearly all roadways in our three-county area are wet, but icy spots can persist - particularly on bridges and overpasses. Nearly all roadway are running at or near typical speed, however conditions can change minute-by-minute and mile-by-mile - particularly with lake effect snow!

As always - ODOT's best advice: "In Ice & Snow... Take it Slow!"

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Heart of a survivor



Filed on July 14, 2013 by [Rini Jeffers](#)

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AMHERST — That could have been it right there, on that icy highway that cold November morning in the driver's seat of the Ford Edge her husband bought her for her birthday six months before.

That could have been the place where Amy Vitelli died.

By all rights, it didn't look good. A blood-soaked family car impaled on a guardrail. She remembers the screaming that sounded maybe like an animal in pain, coming from her.

And yet, it turns out, God had other plans.

The crash

Vitelli had just ended her overnight shift Nov. 24 at MetroHealth Medical Center in Cleveland, where she worked as a sonographer. It was just before 8 a.m., and she was saying goodbye to her coworkers. Somebody told her to stick around for a doughnut, but she declined, saying she was going to pick up a bed she found on Craigslist before going home to Amherst.

Somebody else called out, "Be careful, there's black ice, and we don't want to see you back here," she recalls. "We always said that to each other."

She made it a quarter of a mile away just past the West 25th Street exit at the Interstate 71 and Jennings Freeway split when the warning came true.

She remembers feeling the loss of control and seeing the guardrail rushing closer. She had time to think "I've seen these type of accidents before, I'll be OK," before she hit.

But the guardrail that stopped her spinning car turned into a spear, ripping through the car's steel. Within seconds the Edge was impaled through the driver's side wheel well and through her seat, cutting across the car and exiting through the rear window.

"I could hear myself screaming. And it's not a sound you'd want to hear coming out of anybody, and knowing it came out of me ..." Vitelli says now.

She saw a woman stop and come toward her.

"I'm screaming for her to help me, and I couldn't reach the door to open it. This arm (her left arm) was horribly broken and dislocated, and I couldn't move my other arm. I found out later my coat was pulled through the seat."

Kelly Slobodian will never forget what she saw.

"I didn't know what I was going to see. You could see the guardrail going through the engine, through



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the back window. It was surreal. I thought she was going to be dead," she said.

Slobodian, a surgical nurse in the intensive care unit at Metro, recognized Vitelli's scrubs and saw her return to her car. She knew there was nothing she could do for her but try to keep her conscious while talking to 911 dispatchers, hold her hand and distract her.

"Even in the car, it looked like it had impaled her," Slobodian, who started to cry when she recalled the scene, said. "She never lost consciousness. She talked about her boys. I knew they were young. At one point, she said she was dying. She said she was cold and hurting. I said, 'No, you can't die, we have to get you to the hospital and get you better for your boys.'"

Cleveland first responders removed her from the car, cutting her out of her clothes and sped her back to Metro. Slobodian knew she would see her again that night, in emergency surgery — she hoped she would.

At Metro, the word slowly started to spread that Vitelli was critically injured. Laura Fulton, the sonographer who came on duty to relieve Vitelli, started noticing Vitelli's name coming through the computer order system with requests for full-body scans and images.

She knew Vitelli had taken a slight tumble the previous day, and at first assumed she was just getting some follow-up care — or someone had the same name as Vitelli.

Then Fulton realized the orders were coming from the trauma department. She immediately headed that way and found her friend. Despite working alongside Vitelli for four or five years at that point, she didn't recognize her. She had to ask someone else "is that her?"

Fulton didn't know the extent of Vitelli's injuries.

"She asked me to straighten her leg out for her, and I lifted the blanket," Fulton said. "And I saw her leg bones. I saw her hip bone."

Fulton gently pulled the blanket back over her friend's shattered body and let no expression cross her face while she told Vitelli she was going to be fine.

"I was so scarred from that incident, and I've seen so much," Fulton said. "I had nightmares and flashbacks for months. I was afraid of guardrails for quite some time. I couldn't even drive on 71 where it happened. I couldn't see that."

Vitelli recounts her injuries "starting at the top": mild concussion; left ulna broken in two places, broken radius, dislocated elbow; sprained right wrist ("they thought it was broken and I would be three limbs out, but it was just sprained"); five left ribs broken; lacerated spleen, internal bleeding; pelvis broken into three pieces, which they thought may have left her incapable of normal voiding function; shattered both tibia and fibia of her left leg, along with the tibial plateau in the knee joint; and then there was her left thigh.

When the guardrail sliced into her car near the parking brake on the left side of the floorboard, it traveled up and through the driver's seat.

Vitelli was somehow pushed to the middle just enough that the guardrail slid along her left side, breaking her left arm, leg, ribs and her pelvis — and then it "degloved" her left thigh, stripping off all skin, muscle and fat tissue from the bone. The tissue that remained was full of metal splinters. She needed eight units of blood.

But she also had a mark on her face — a mark that took on a whole new meaning to Amy, her husband, Eric, and their two sons, Daniel and Mark.

It was a bruise, deep reds and watercolor purples, in the very center of her forehead — a bruise that formed a perfectly shaped heart.

It took two hours before anyone found a number to call Eric, who was pacing the house, worried about his wife's absence and cell phone silence since he knew she had planned to meet someone from Craigslist.

The Metro social worker who called told him Amy was being rushed into emergency surgery and to come right away. He hung up and took the boys — without telling them about their mother — to his parents' house. The boys knew something was wrong.

They knew their Dad was crying in his bedroom, but Mark, who was 6 at the time, thought his grandma



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was dead.

Once at Metro, Mark saw a cousin who also happens to be a trauma nurse there. He asked how Amy was, and she had a strange look on her face before saying, "I'll get the doctor." When he finally saw her, he said he was grateful to see her wince when nurses inserted an IV — it meant she still had feeling, ruling out paralysis.

That cousin later told him that when Amy came into the ER, the cops told the doctors they had never seen anything like her accident before — somehow, it was like Amy had been pushed out of the way of the guardrail.

"There is no reason I should've been pushed like that. But God came through, and kissed my forehead and said 'You're going to live and do my work,'" Amy said.

"You mean the angel in the airbag?" Mark asked.

Eric remembers standing on the fifth floor, waiting alone while Amy was in surgery, looking out the window at the Cleveland skyline and being so overwhelmed.

"I knew I couldn't do it alone," he said. "And then I saw the outline in the reflection of two men standing behind me and it was pastors Tim and Ryan. And it was like a relief over me. I knew right then that there were a lot of people, the right people, to help me through it."

The men, Tim Holt and Ryan Hurd, are pastors at A Fresh Wind church in Amherst, which the Vitellis attend. They came to pray with Eric.

Months later, Eric had the image of the heart on Amy's forehead tattooed onto his forearm, with the words "Kissed by an Angel" circling it.

Rising again

Amy spent three weeks in the hospital, undergoing two surgeries to try and repair her body. She would count the hours from the moment Eric left at 8 p.m. until he came back the next day. Her old friends in the X-ray and ultrasound departments would know her medication schedule, and they took turns taking their breaks in her room, cheering her up.

"It was so lonely in the hospital, and it would mean so much that they cared," she said.

An external fixator — a system of screws drilled into her leg bones and protruding out of the skin, affixed to metal rods — was implanted in December. Three metal plates were placed from her knee to just above her ankle, held in place with probably 20 screws, holding her shattered leg together.

Her coworkers from the radiology department told her the X-rays of her leg "looked like shredded wheat."

"I came out of surgery screaming and crying, it hurt so bad," she said.

The pain didn't abate until after the fixator was removed in February, despite heavy-duty painkillers around the clock. She came home Dec. 11.

It only got worse after Jan. 3, when the doctors stopped her pain medicine, typical protocol to prevent addiction. She was switched to medicine that targeted nerve pain. Friends would visit and tell her stories, just to try and keep her mind off of the excruciating pain.

Despite the medications, she would only sleep one or two hours a day. She remembers many nights of crying in her bed downstairs, and Eric would come and spend the night on the floor next to her.

"I couldn't concentrate enough to read books. I watched a lot of TV. The best feeling I could have is if they (her kids) were lying in bed with me, not trying to hit my legs but just lying there."

Her mother, a nurse, was supposed to move to Houston the week after her accident. Her dad made the move there to start his new job, but her mom stayed and moved in with Amy to take care of her for several weeks before moving to Texas. Eric returned to his job as a postman in Oberlin, and both juggled the family's needs, the boys' school and sports schedules while taking care of Amy.

Even after the fixator was removed, the pain didn't go away.

Her thigh and hip were stitched back together in a different shape than before. Part of it is just skin

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stretched over bone now. Scars snake across her leg and her arm, marking the impact of the crash. Every step she takes brings “some measure of pain.”

“The pain I’m in right now, before the accident I would be taking meds and crying,” she said, looking down at the immobilizing brace, the cane, her left foot that has lost nearly all sensation. “But I know what major pain is and I know what I can handle now.”

New normal

There was before, and then there is after. Amy’s crash so thoroughly revamped the life of her family that only in the aftermath did they begin to see the road that led them here.

Two months before the crash, the Vitellis had put their longtime Amherst home up for sale in the notoriously hard market — and sold it within two weeks. In a rush, they found just the right house for them down the street. They moved in September to the split-level, spacious home that also happened to have a lower level with a bedroom and handicapped-accessible bathroom. At the time, they thought it would make a great guest room or office. It became Amy’s recovery suite. She would have been unable to even enter their old home and would likely have gone to a nursing home to convalesce, Eric said.

Days before her crash, Eric traded in his beloved, almost-paid-off truck for a new car on a whim. He didn’t even really know why he was doing it. But when he spent three weeks traveling to Metro every day to stay with Amy, and then transporting her for months with her leg in an external fixator and unable to bend, he knew why.

“If I would’ve had my truck, this never would have worked,” he said.

And then there were the dreams, the dreams Amy had had for years, of being in a serious accident and telling someone to “take me to Metro, I work at Metro, take me to Metro.” The first two passersby that stopped to help her were Metro nurses; one was from the orthopedics floor and would soon be Amy’s nurse.

“It was like God was in motion the whole time,” Amy said.

The couple’s boys, Daniel, 10, and Mark, 7, had spent their lives learning about compassion and empathy accompanying their mother while she delivered Meals on Wheels in Amherst, serving on the city’s Office on Aging board, and volunteering with a program she set up at her former church that provided shelter, meals and help to homeless families. They’ve been a great help to their mother as she has healed, bringing her coffee, unloading the dishwasher, even bringing her a bedpan once, while still being boys, out of school for the summer and playing baseball.

Just after the accident, when the kids were discovering the extent of their mother’s injuries, Daniel quipped — “Dad, Mom’s all right,” because all of her injuries were on the left side.

Amy still has physical therapy every week, and often works her leg in her neighbor’s pool. She has a brace that slowly stretches her leg muscles back into flexing movement that she must wear for six hours every day — although it is immobilizing, and she cannot do anything while wearing it.

Her left leg causes her constant pain, although she keeps it in perspective. She still uses wheelchairs when there are far distances to walk, and she is prone to fatigue and stiffness.

But she counts with joy each step down from wheelchair to walker to cane. She has resolved to return to work by September and is optimistic. Just recently she was able to resume sleeping in her old bedroom with Eric again, instead of her “recovery suite” downstairs.

She continues to have flashbacks of the crash and of her stay in the hospital. Three months passed before Eric could bring himself to take the bag of the bloody clothes that paramedics cut from her out of his trunk. Blood was still pooled in the bottom of the bag, but that is not what shocked Amy. It was her scrub top with the long skidmark ground across the side where the guardrail arced past her body, breaking her ribs and skinning her thigh.

The tragedy has not been without its sweetness. She celebrated the day she could go to the bathroom on her own; she rejoiced the first time she drove herself to Metro without panicking.

She reconnected an old friendship that had fallen apart. She has a bag full of all the encouraging notes and letters people sent, including some from her boys. She has met strangers who heard of her crash

and had been praying for her before they met. Their church family provided meals for weeks; she would get cards from people she hadn't seen in years with money tucked in, for gas and expenses.

At Christmas, she received a large, framed card signed by several doctors and medical professionals from her past. Amy taught incoming residents for years how to take ultrasounds, and was an adjunct faculty in the ultrasound program at Lorain County Community College until the crash. One of the doctors, who now lives in South Carolina and hasn't seen Amy in seven years, sent her a \$1,000 check and a note that read: "Tell Amy that this might be a small fraction of what I owe her. The people of Northeast Ohio need her to get back to scanning."

At the public library where she often took her boys for story time, the librarians passed around a get well card at the children's Christmas party and collected \$200 for gas money. Her room was always full of people and balloons and goodwill. One lady told her "this is the best witness you can ever have, people asking you how you can do this with a smile on your face and you just say Jesus."

"I knew at that moment that I was blessed. Even though it was horrible and the hardest thing I've ever been through, I knew it was for a reason," Amy said.

She started delivering Meals on Wheels again June 11, as soon as the family got a second car. She cannot balance herself on a cane and carry the food, but her boys do the carrying and the knocking.

And within the last few weeks she has started her first assignment as a peer visitor as part of the Trauma Survivor Network at Metro. The program, only offered at six hospitals throughout the U.S., is funded by the Department of Defense. Peer visitors are nominated for participation by surgeons and trauma doctors, and usually have undergone severe physical damage, have overcome great challenges and come through it with a positive attitude and can bring encouragement to others. There are seven peer visitors in the program, including Amy.

She completed training in June and has just begun meeting with other trauma survivors who want to know "what will my life look like after my accident? Will it be a bleak experience?"

She said she also is considering a tattoo to add to the scars on her damaged leg, to serve as a reminder, not just of the pain, but of what God can do with it.

The author, Rini Jeffers, learned about Amy's story through Jeffers' brother-in-law, Tim Holt, the church pastor mentioned in the story. Contact Jeffers at 329-7155 or ctnews@chroniclet.com.

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