

Believing in Miracles

Their lives were changed in a split second, but this N.Va. couple finds comfort in the enduring values of faith, hope and love.

Denny and Diana Glusko start and end their day with prayer. Despite the wrenching transformation of their lives, that much has never changed.

He bends low over his wife's bed, her hand sometimes clasped in his, as both give thanks to God. Denny prays that Diana will breathe free of pain. For himself, he prays for patience. Just beyond the door are the usual disruptions of a hospital unit -- the noise, the glare. But inside Room 2-007, it is different.



“Yours is the honor and the glory,” Denny says. Diana whispers, “Amen.”

Never have they questioned whether God has a purpose for this journey, which started one afternoon last May when their car veered across a rural road in Fauquier County, slammed into a ditch and flipped. He was driving when a cup of coffee diverted his attention and Diana gasped, “Oh, Denny!” He braced himself with the steering wheel and crawled out his shattered window without a scratch. She had nothing to grab for protection. Neither she nor Denny was wearing a seat belt.

The impact broke Diana's second cervical vertebra, paralyzing her from the neck down.

In the days that followed, both asked God to forgive them for their disobedience of the law. Then they asked for guidance and strength for whatever lay ahead. Three seasons have passed, and Diana still is not home. Yet instead of despair, they talk of miracles -- and faith.

“The Bible says, ‘If you're going to share in my glory, you share in my suffering,’ “ Denny explained.

How many times has Denny offered that scripture to others? It now speaks to him profoundly. “I have a greater understanding of that resurrection Sunday,” he says.

A Spiritual Conversion

She had come to the dance with a flip hairdo and vivacious smile, and when he glimpsed her across the floor of that small-town YMCA more than four decades ago, he turned to a friend and declared, “That’s the girl I’m going to marry.” Diana was 14, Denny 18. They wed several months after she graduated from high school.

She was essentially who she is today. Quiet and gentle, although capable of quips that make her blue eyes flash.

During the interminable expanse last year when Diana was silenced, incapable of breathing without the whoosh of a ventilator, her eyes became her sole means of communication. They conveyed every-

thing from confusion to relief. But never a complaint, says Denny, who has yet to spend a night away from the woman he variously calls mom, grandma, my bride, DeeDee or, in their most anguished moments, “my poor child.”

Her trust in Jesus Christ as her savior has always been deep and full. Not so his. Early in their marriage, Diana realized how much of a Sunday-only churchgoer her husband was, and a condescending one at that. Although gregarious with many people, with his wife and two children he was controlling, even cruel. Back then, he was a cocky, ambitious businessman working for a large food vending company. At home, he expected no one to cross him.

“Diana should have left me over and over and over,” Denny says. “She prayed for 17 years that the Lord would save me.”

Diana says: “I believe in a commitment.”

His spiritual conversion began in the early 1980s, when their young son was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease. Within a few years, his would be a shift of living as dramatic as any New Testament disciple’s. He and Diana sold their house and moved so he could minister to young people in a tiny Ohio community. He went on to lead a struggling church in Prince William County.

Seven years ago, looking for some part-time counseling work, he turned onto the long main drive of Youth for Tomorrow. Former Washington Redskins coach Joe Gibbs had founded the residential program for at-risk adolescents and placed it on a pastoral sweep of land outside Manassas. Denny drove around to the basketball court to see who was there.

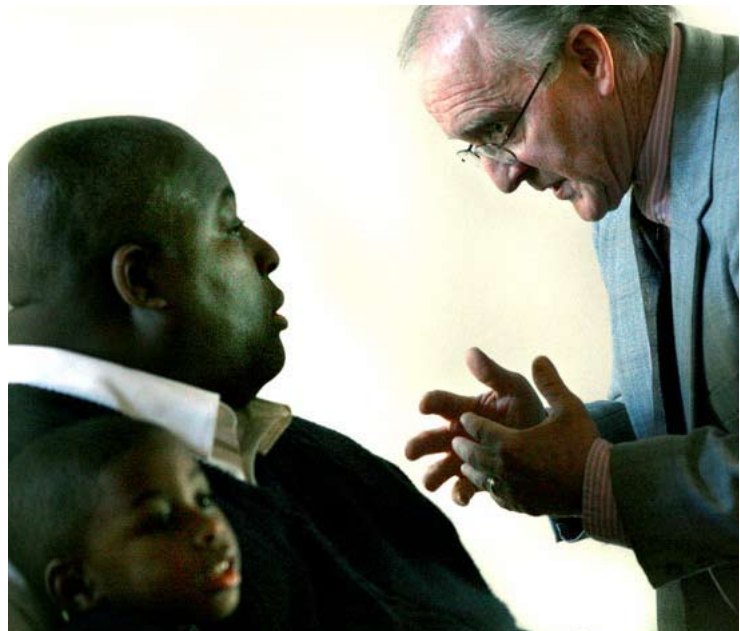


He realized almost immediately, he told chief executive Gary Jones, that the Lord had directed him from the moment he entered the campus. He would take any position available. Hired as a counselor, he was soon being greeted as “Pastor Denny” and regularly drawing the teens as well as staff to learn more about Jesus.

“You know it’s got to be something kids want to do if, on a Friday afternoon, 35 of them show up for Bible study,” Jones says.

Denny was absent from work for months after the accident. These days, he tries to work at least a dozen hours weekly, usually driving in exhaustion the 80-mile round trip from Diana’s hospital in Northeast Washington. But if she is having a bad morning, anxious or in pain, he goes nowhere, or he waits until late at night to leave, making as quick a ride as possible to their house in Stafford County to retrieve clothes.

His boss grieves over the agony they have endured. Denny is 62; Diana, 59. Jones believes just one thing has sustained them. “You walk away marveling at how Diana shows such courage, such grace, and how Denny is always by her side,” he says. “He’s set a standard of walking in faith. Both have.”



Their Imperfect Miracle

After this much time, Room 2-007 feels claustrophobically small and cluttered. The Gluskos have stayed long enough that it has taken on elements of home. Amid the suction machine, carbon dioxide monitor and other medical equipment, a fabric angel that Diana sewed adorns one wall -- everyone attests to the beautiful crafts she used to make and sell -- and Denny’s jacket hangs in the bathroom. Extra silverware is in the shallow cabinet behind the mirror; condiments sit on a windowsill.

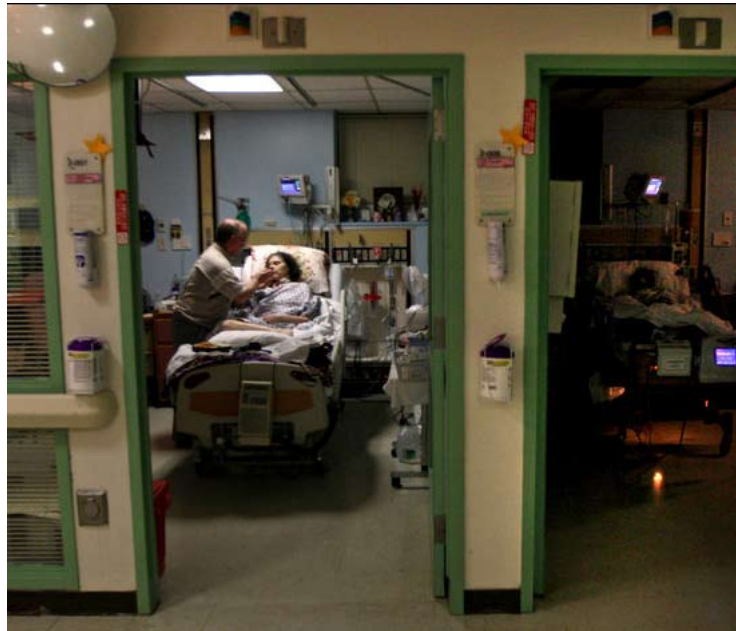
Denny tries to flavor up the meal trays that arrive with monotony three times a day. Much is never touched, and Diana has lost more than 30 pounds. “Now tell me,” he cajoles one evening, sprinkling Parmesan cheese on a plate of noodles. “Doesn’t that look like the Olive Garden?”

Several blocks east of Capitol Hill, the Specialty Hospital of Washington is their third hospital since May 6. First was Inova Fairfax, where Diana was taken by air-ambulance. Next was the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, the New Jersey hospital that treated actor Christopher Reeve after his spinal injury.

When Diana left Kessler in August because her health insurance company decided she wasn’t making ad-

equate progress, she still was not breathing on her own and doctors there gave her little hope for ever doing so. Less than 24 hours after she arrived at Specialty, Leslie Kingslow promised her otherwise. The doctor kept his word.

It was a miracle, Denny and Diana are sure, although one that required arduous weeks of weaning from the ventilator. And in December, a surgeon at Washington Hospital Center wired her with an unusual pacemaker -- for her lungs. He sutured two electrodes to the nerve that should trigger her diaphragm to contract. Radio receivers were implanted below the skin; above were taped rings and wires connecting to a dual-dial black box, much like the remote-control unit of a model airplane. All to circumvent the damage done in that one split second last spring.



It is not a perfect miracle, to be sure. Diana says she often feels as if a straitjacket is squeezing her chest, a pressure-pain that can push her toward panic. Denny tries repositioning the pillows around and between her legs, straightening her listing shoulders, talking her down.

“Denny, you have no idea. No one has any idea,” she chides him. Her response is rarely harsher, never poisoned by bitterness or blame. She says she forgave her husband in the first days after their crash and then accepted her circumstance. It was an accident, nothing more. “I don’t think I ever said, ‘Why me?’” she says. Not that she is free of regrets: “I wish I’d worn a seat belt.”

Every two hours, Diana must be turned from side to side; the trace movements she has recovered in her hands and an upper leg are not up to the task themselves and may never be. “God bless you,” Denny invariably tells whoever has helped him. “Thank you for caring for her.”

Diana’s primary hospital physician, Manisha Singal, worries about the immense challenges looming after she leaves the hospital. She also marvels, saying she has never seen such unconditional love and support between two people. She has watched it renew “a sense of possibilities” in the hospital staff. Nurses and others have joined in prayer in that room, and Denny has ministered to families and patients elsewhere on the floor. “He’s become our local pastor,” Singal says.

The final amen every night is Denny and Diana’s alone -- after he has fed her the last half-dozen or so pills, smoothed her sheets, brushed her hair, spun shut the blinds. After they’ve kissed. He climbs into her wheelchair, parked close to the bed and reclined to its maximum angle. He reaches for the light, pulls his John

3:16 baseball cap over his eyes, and both wait for the blessing of sleep.

An Unfolding Future

Their modest home will never accommodate a quadriplegic, so Denny and Diana have been making plans. They will move in with their daughter, Tracy Lamb, and her family in Stafford. Tracy has two girls, and Diana practically raised the 8-year-old. What she misses most is holding Marie. "I used to love putting my arms around her," Diana says.

Tracy has continued to wrestle with questions in the past 10 months. "I don't understand why God would allow this to happen to her," she admits. Her parents' faith awes her. "They not only wore it easily when life was good but even when life turned on them."



Faith or not, since late February it had seemed that the insurance company had the upper hand. It balked over what it would pay toward the equipment Diana needs to stay safe outside the hospital, and the delay kept her in the hospital at a cost Denny doesn't want to calculate. He will face staggering bills on his own. Only in overwhelming fatigue does his voice edge toward despair.

"We will go home when the Lord sends us home," he tells himself.

Last week, the impasse finally ended when he negotiated a bed and mattress and a key piece of monitoring gear -- the very basics. That cleared the way for Diana to be discharged as soon as tomorrow. It won't be in time for this resurrection Sunday. But close enough, says Denny.

"All honor, glory and praise to the Lord."