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Overcoming difficult odds

Annapolitan's book details her recovery from a broken back

By Susan Gvozdas | Special to The Sun

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Less than two years after snapping her spine in a bus crash that killed two teammates, Haley Scott was ready to dive into the University of Notre Dame pool again.

She splashed into the water to the cheers of not just classmates, family and fellow swimmers, but also the state trooper who responded to the accident scene in January 1992, nurses from the hospital where she healed and the mother of one of the young women who died.

Defying doctors' predictions that she would never walk - let alone swim - again, on Oct. 29, 1993, Scott posted the best time of her life in the 50-yard freestyle and won the heat.

"The most exhilarating feeling for me was not the race but the start," said her former coach, Tim Welsh, who broke a rib in the crash. "The moment she left the block, I thought, 'My God, she did it.'"

Today, Haley Scott is Haley Scott DeMaria, a wife and mother of two in Annapolis. Her book about her emotional and physical recovery, *What Though the Odds*, co-written by Bob Schaller, is set to hit bookstands Monday under the auspices of USA Swimming, the sport's national governing body.

The book is meant to be a guide on how to emerge from tragedy, not just another beat-the-odds story, Scott DeMaria said.

"Tragedy will affect everybody in their lives to some extent," said Scott DeMaria, 34. "I could not have come out of this without my community."

She rebuffed earlier attempts to tell her tale. For years, she was not ready to relive the night that took the lives of fellow freshmen Meghan Beeler and Colleen Hipp.

The women's swim team was headed back from a meet in Chicago and was just a few miles from home when its bus skidded on an icy highway during a blizzard, struck a culvert and flipped over. Scott climbed out an open window and walked several feet in the snow before claspings her back in pain and collapsing, said teammate Susan Bohdan Walton.

Walton, who suffered whiplash in the accident, stayed with Scott until help arrived an hour later. When Scott complained that she couldn't feel her legs, Walton told her that the coldness of the snow had probably made her feel numb.

In fact, the snow might have prevented permanent paralysis by staving off swelling in her spine, doctors later told Scott. Doctors initially prepared her for life in a wheelchair and the possibility of never bearing children. Her fortunes changed, however, and Scott began a long road to recovery. It included more surgeries when the steel rods supporting her back broke apart and punctured her skin.

After a summer of lying flat on her back, she returned for her sophomore year at Notre Dame. On her first Saturday back, she was honored during halftime of a football game. Scott, who had been unable to attend the funerals and memorial services for her friends, finally felt the warmth of the close-knit Notre Dame community in full force.

Scott resumed her collegiate swimming career but never again swam faster than her comeback race. Her chances of developing into an elite swimmer had ended with the accident, a fact that deepened her pain.

But over the years, Scott realized that her story could help others. After returning to her hometown of Phoenix, Ariz., she was working at a Catholic prep school when a senior was killed in a drunken-driving accident on prom night. She gave grieving students insight into how to survive the pain and disillusionment.

"That was hard, but it was very healing for me," she said.

Still, it wasn't until she moved to Philadelphia in 2000 that she thought about telling her story publicly. When a neighbor was stricken with terminal cancer, Scott DeMaria shared her written recollections with her. The woman, Kathy Reitenour, later told Scott DeMaria that she was one of the few people who understood the agony of fighting for survival.

"To see how much she was moved by it, I realized that keeping this to myself ... was almost selfish on my part," Scott DeMaria said.

When USA Swimming approached Scott DeMaria a few years ago about a possible movie, she was finally ready. After going through several scripts that didn't work, the two sides agreed to pursue a book. She obtained the permission from the Beeler and Hipp families.

Scott DeMaria said she believes that the book provides the in-depth treatment the story needed. The title comes from a line in the Notre Dame fight song. Former Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz wrote the foreword.

USA Swimming started publishing excerpts last week on its Web site, www.usaswimming.org.

"I think it's a story that ought to be an inspiration not only to everyone within the swimming community, but to anyone who has had to overcome a tragic personal experience or, even worse, a physical accident," said Chuck Wielgus, executive director of USA Swimming.

Walton, a counselor who lives in Atlanta, said the book focuses on Scott DeMaria's journey and does not try to force a happy ending on a story that claimed the lives of two friends.

"She is aware that her comeback story begins with their deaths," Walton said.

Scott DeMaria's story of gutsy determination can give others hope, said Welsh, now head coach of the men's swim team at Notre Dame.

"She's a woman who had no business walking again, had no business swimming again, had no business graduating on time, had no business having children," he said. "She did all of it."


Since the birth of her boys, James, 6, and Edward, 4, Scott DeMaria has not found time to swim, but in the past few months, friends have coaxed her back into the pool.

Scott DeMaria, who moved to Annapolis in 2004, said she tries to become a part of the community and help out when she can. She knows the importance of having a network to rely on.


"Part of that is to be there for others when they are going through hard times," she said. "The only thing I can do is


reach out to others in their time of need."

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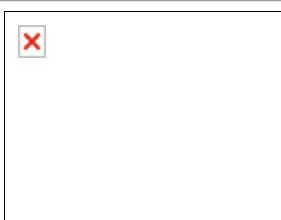
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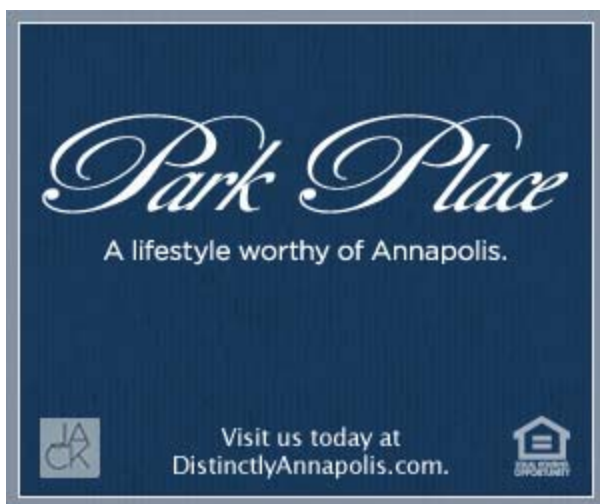
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