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Healing the wounds through words

Crash survivor authors detailed account of night

By David Haugh | Tribune reporter
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The school field trip last fall called for Haley Scott DeMaria's 6-year-old son, James, and his class to travel from Annapolis, Md., to Baltimore. It would require a routine bus ride.

Until Scott DeMaria realized there was no such thing.

The former Notre Dame swimmer remembers bursting into tears at the thought of putting the older of her two sons on that school bus. So on the morning of the trip, Scott DeMaria instead decided to drive James and his buddy the 30 miles.

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"I knew there'd come a day when they would have to ride a bus and I didn't want to put my fears onto them, but ..." Scott DeMaria recalled on the phone from her home in Maryland. "At some point I know I have to let them live their own lives. So I had to explain it all to him, and he was OK."

Haley Scott DeMaria is OK, too, these days, even if she still hasn't brought herself to board a bus in more than 16 years.

Not since the awful, icy night she broke her spine, Jan. 24, 1992, when the chartered bus carrying the Notre Dame

swim team crashed on the Indiana Toll Road four miles from the South Bend exit while returning home from a meet at Northwestern.

The accident claimed the lives of Scott DeMaria's classmates, Meghan Beeler and Colleen Hipp, who were pinned under the bus, and forever changed so many others. Scott DeMaria, an 18-year-old freshman at the time, broke her spine after the bus rolled over and threw her against a window she eventually crawled through to safety.

In a book released earlier this week, "What Though The Odds," Scott DeMaria recounts that traumatic trip home in painstaking detail: From the reason Beeler moved to the back row (to study) to the movie the team watched before the crash ("Dying Young") to where every team member was sitting before the bus started sliding down the embankment before flipping.

"Wet snow slaps my cheeks and begins to numb my body. I start shivering," Scott DeMaria writes. "I cannot fathom what has happened and I should probably be thankful that shock shields me from the grim reality that lies in a heap in, around and—most sadly of all—under this bus."

Scott DeMaria lay still in the snow for about an hour, the most seriously injured of the 35 survivors. She couldn't wiggle her toes until five days later. A nurse at a South Bend hospital, as Scott DeMaria recalls in the book without bitterness, warned her that she needed to accept "the paralysis" she would be facing. She never did.

Within a month, Scott DeMaria had learned how to walk again but only after crawling on a mat and progressing from a walker to a cane. In less than two years after the accident, on Oct. 29, 1993, she was swimming competitively again for Notre Dame and won her heat in the 50-yard freestyle with a personal-best time of 25.04.

In all, it would take six operations to repair Scott DeMaria's spine, including a procedure to

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fix one of the steel rods that her mother found had protruded from her skin and made a bloody mess. Scars remain, and not just physical.

Writing the book, a decade and a half later, gave Scott DeMaria an opportunity to show everybody how well she is healing ... and perhaps help others struggling to overcome personal trauma.

"In many ways it was exciting to do this because I'm at such a good place in my life," Scott DeMaria said.

She's 34 and lives with husband Jamie, a pharmaceutical executive, and their two sons in Annapolis. Scott DeMaria recently ran a 10K race, once competed in the Los Angeles Marathon and has resumed swimming for fun.

Occasional numbness in her back, legs and feet serve as a constant reminder of the most harrowing night of her life, but Scott DeMaria smiles through any pain. Some of her best friends in the neighborhood didn't even know about the bus crash until a couple of years ago.

She had passed on two book proposals and a TV movie deal in the years since the accident before deciding that sharing her story now made sense.

"It was hard reliving it at times," she acknowledged. "There were plenty of tears, but happy tears."

Many of them have been shed with the Beeler and Hipp families, who might cry a little more upon reading a book about a 16-year-old ache. But Ann Hipp, Colleen's mother, appreciated Scott DeMaria asking the family for permission to write the book and called her "an inspiration."

Hipp hasn't read the book but looks forward to doing so during a quiet family vacation later this month. She hopes reliving those painful memories might have the same effect that meeting a former Notre Dame athlete from her hometown of St. Louis once had: Later that night, Hipp dreamed about Colleen hugging her.

"Maybe I'll have another one of those dreams after reading [the book] and connecting with a Notre Dame memory," Hipp said.

Scott DeMaria says she has dreams, too, about crashing in planes, trains and cars but never buses. She also has dreamed often about the friends she lost that night, friends whose deaths still shape her life.

"Whenever I go to South Bend, for example, Meghan's grave is the first place I go whether it's 10 a.m. or 10 at night," Scott DeMaria said. "I've never gone back there without stopping. Sometimes it's for five minutes, sometimes it's for 45. But it's a place that always has called me."

The calling to write a book felt just as powerful to her. More than anything, the voice of Haley Scott DeMaria emerging after 214 pages reflects that strength.

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