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Bus crash survivors offers hope to others

Associated Press

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SOUTH BEND, Ind. -- Haley Scott DeMaria knows that hope can be sorely tested.

Sixteen years ago, the bus carrying the Notre Dame women's swim team skidded on the highway in Indiana, slid down an embankment and flipped. DeMaria was on her back in the snow for an hour after pulling herself from the wreckage. Two teammates were killed. Most of the other 34 people on the bus sustained minor injuries.

Scott DeMaria, now 34, has written a book, "What Though The Odds" -- a line from the Notre Dame fight song -- describing what happened on Jan. 24, 1992, and how her teammates, classmates and community helped her maintain hope. Her goal is to inspire others by her journey.

"What I looked at within myself was I have this gift, there was a reason I healed," she said. "I truly feel like this is my calling, to reach out to people. That's very satisfying to me. It used to be difficult to do because again it was sort of reliving what I had been through."

For years she couldn't talk about what happened on that cold, snowy night without crying.

One moment the women were watching the closing credits of the movie "Dying Young" starring Julia Roberts, and the next, the lives of everyone on board changed forever.

In 2000, she married Jamie DeMaria, a former Notre Dame swim team manager, and was happy to move to Annapolis, Md., where people wouldn't know her as a bus crash survivor. She liked keeping the story to herself.

But the few times she did share her story with people facing challenges, she found it inspired them. That motivated her. Finding herself the happy stay-at-home mother of two, it became easier to talk about the ordeal.

What really inspired her, though, were the memories of her two fallen teammates, Colleen Hipp and Margaret "Meghan" Beeler, both of whom were fellow freshmen.

"They were never, never off my mind. They were the reason I wanted to walk. They were the reason I wanted to swim. It was the one thing I could do for them," she said.

She first wiggled her right big toe five days after the accident and it took a month to learn to walk again. Like a baby, she first rolled on a mat, then crawled. She took her first steps using a walker, then a cane and finally walked on her own.

After five months of training, on Oct. 29, 1993, she raced for the first time since the accident, winning her heat in the 50-yard freestyle with a time of 25.04 seconds, finishing eighth among 30 entrants.

Scott DeMaria graduated with a history degree from Notre Dame a semester behind her classmates.

She says time has given her a perspective of how blessed she is to have survived, but still leaves her with questions.

"Really the 'why' question I've asked myself over the past several years, 16 years really, is: 'Why have I come through this the way that I did? Why did I heal? Why was I able to walk?' And then one step further, 'What should I be doing with this?'"

The answer she came to is sharing her stories. The book being released June 9 is just the start she said. She wants to talk to people facing challenges and help them get through their troubles. She already is receiving e-mail from people who have heard about her book.

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She said the bus accident still affects most decisions in her life, including how she raises her children and whom she married.

She knew her husband in college, but they never dated. After graduation, she returned to her hometown of Phoenix and accepted a job at her old high school, Xavier College Preparatory, including coaching the swim team, and eventually became assistant dean of students.

She was a chaperone at the junior-senior prom in 1999 and Jamie DeMaria, then a graduate student at Florida State, came out to be her date. A student leaving the prom was killed when her car was struck by a drunken driver. Scott DeMaria's pain resurfaced and she did what she could to help the girl's classmates grieve. She was struck by the support DeMaria gave her.

"I knew that night and the following weeks and months afterward that Jamie was someone who understood that this was something that would always be a part of my life and something that I needed to do," she said.

As happy as Scott DeMaria is these days, there are still scars. She broke down in tears when her son came home from kindergarten with a permission slip to go on a trip to the Baltimore Aquarium on a bus. She couldn't sign it.

"I couldn't do it. I had to figure out a way to explain to him why he couldn't go on a bus with his friends on this field trip, which is so fun," she said.

Instead, she drove her son to the aquarium. A friend took her child off the bus and went with DeMaria, so she and her son wouldn't be alone.

She has physical scars as well. Last June, she went through two more painful operations to stabilize and strengthen her spine. But she has nerve damage which causes numbness in her legs and feet, along with some other physical challenges that years ago she couldn't have imagined living with.

"But now with the perspective of what are real problems in life, it's not that bad," she said.

She hopes the release of her book will be the beginning of being able to reach out to even more people going through difficult times.

"I'm not quite sure how to go about it. But I've also learned to have faith that everything will work itself out," she said.

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