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From the Los Angeles Times
BILL DWYRE:



Notre Dame's fatal bus crash was only the start for Haley Scott DeMaria

Some 16 years after fatal bus crash, the former Notre Dame swimmer tells of her harrowing recovery process from a spinal injury in her book 'What Though the Odds.'
May 20 2008

ANNAPOLIS, Md. -- By all accounts, including hers, Haley Scott was just an average college swimmer. No top national times, no Olympic moments.

She's Haley Scott DeMaria now, suburban housewife and happily married mother of two. She wrote a book about herself, to be released June 2, so there has to be something more to the story.

There is. Much more.

A little past midnight in the wee hours of Jan. 24, 1992, Scott, an 18-year-old freshman, and her Notre Dame swim team were on the Indiana Toll Road in a chartered bus. They had competed against Northwestern in Chicago, and were four miles from their South Bend exit. They had just finished watching a Julia Roberts' movie, "Dying Young."

It had been a warm day in wintry northern Indiana. Scott DeMaria laughs about that now. The Irish had recruited her from Xavier College Prep School in Phoenix and brought her in one day in February when the temperature was 60 degrees. That happens about every 75 years.

"I thought, hey, I can handle this," she recalls.

The warmth that January day, however, turned cold and snowy that night, and the snow turned quickly to ice. Scott DeMaria recalls the bus passing a car, then veering back to the right lane. "I thought we were exiting," she says.

Instead, the bus skidded on the ice, left the road, slid sideways down an embankment and, when a wheel hit a concrete culvert, turned over.

Two team members, freshmen Meghan Beeler and Colleen Hipp, were thrown from the bus and killed when it landed on top of them. Scott DeMaria was slammed around inside and ended up next to a window that either popped open or was blown out. She pulled herself out and ended up on her back in the snow.

"I remember telling everybody two things, over and over," she says. "I was cold and my back hurt."

She was dressed in standard Dress Code A for Notre Dame traveling women's teams, cotton skirt and top. She stayed like that, on her back, in the snow, for an hour. Most likely, that is why she is walking today. She had no idea she had broken her spine. The term "paraplegic" hadn't occurred to her, even though it now defined her.

"I noticed when they finally lifted me onto a board for the ambulance, I couldn't move my legs," she says. "But one of the girls who stayed with me reminded me that I had been on my back in the snow for an hour, so I was probably just numb. I'm sure that's what I wanted to hear, so I accepted it."

Less than four hours later, Scott DeMaria was signing a consent form for doctors to perform back surgery. Her parents were on their way from Phoenix. But doctors said her best chance for recovery was having surgery quickly, before swelling on her injured spine, held somewhat in check by her hour in the snow, could build.

"I said, 'Well, what are we waiting for?'"

After surgery, she was told that something, some movement or feeling, needed to happen in the next 48 hours. Nothing happened, except for visits from doctors and nurses, preparing her for life in a wheelchair.

"I told my mom, it was going to be all right," says Scott DeMaria. "I told her I still had my mind. I could teach from a wheelchair."

A week later, as her father sat bedside, her right big toe moved. As he watched, it did it again. "I squeezed his hand," she says, "and pretty soon, the room was full of happy nurses and doctors."

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Doctors told her she would be in the hospital for a year, that her best-case scenario was walking with braces. Three weeks after the accident, she stood with a walker. Two weeks after that, she walked with a cane.

Scott DeMaria went to Phoenix for spring break. Then, incredibly, she returned to Notre Dame for the rest of the spring semester. She had two rods in her back, holding her spine in place, and was in a torso body cast. She got around with a cane and a golf cart.

"I was the only non-football player to get one," she says.

The return to South Bend was not her family's first choice. Scott DeMaria insisted on it.

"My mom went to Meghan's funeral," she says. "She understood."

The summer of 1992 became Scott DeMaria's personal hell.

One night, at home in Phoenix, her mother helped her take off the back portion of her torso cast and discovered a blood-soaked mess. One of the rods in her back had broken loose and punctured her skin.

She was rushed to San Diego and had three more surgical procedures. The rods had been inserted from behind, and the longer she had them, the more she bent forward. The San Diego surgeons removed the rods and did their repairs from the front. To do so, they had to deflate her lungs, move her stomach and tie off arteries to her heart.

Eventually, they inserted a four-inch piece of bone, then shaved it off a bit and snapped it into place. She could sit up straight, but permanent healing would be slow. She stayed in San Diego the rest of that summer, flat on her back, allowed to sit up only five minutes a day.

Again, against family sentiment, Scott DeMaria returned to Notre Dame for her sophomore year. On her first Saturday back, Sept. 12, 1992, Notre Dame tied Michigan, 17-17. At halftime, in front of 59,075 in Notre Dame Stadium, she stepped onto the field and received the Maxwell House Spirit of Notre Dame Award.

The comeback moments kept coming.

On Oct. 29, 1993, Haley Scott swam in a meet for Notre Dame. She won her heat in the 50 free in 25.04 seconds, her best time ever.

But the fairy tale did not end with NCAA titles and Olympic victory stands. "I never got back to where I had been," she says.

In 2000, she married Jamie DeMaria, who had been a swim team manager at Notre Dame and had kept in touch after they both graduated in '95. He is an executive in a pharmaceutical firm and they live in Annapolis.

The marriage began with the knowledge that she probably couldn't have children. There was nerve damage and permanent numb spots in her legs and feet. But Scott DeMaria became pregnant and had a natural childbirth. The anesthesiologist in the delivery room had taken one look at the scars on her back and refused to give her an epidural injection.

On that Jan. 23, 2002, within hours of the 10th anniversary of the accident, James DeMaria was born. Now, there is also Edward, age 4.

The story remains gut-wrenching, compelling. But it is also 16 years old.

So why a book now?

"We lived in Philadelphia a few years ago," says Scott DeMaria, now 34. "A neighbor, Kathy Reitenour, had cancer. She was 38, had four kids, and it was terminal. I had written parts of my story and one day, I gave it to her. A few days later, she came over, gave me a hug and said, 'You understand.'"

Soon, Kathy Reitenour died.

"When she hugged me that day," Scott DeMaria said, "I realized that my story is a gift, that it needs to be shared."

That's her agenda. No expectation of the New York Times bestseller list, no movie on the horizon. She has a powerful story and just wants to tell it.

Oh, yes. The title of the book, written with Bob Schaller, is "What Though the Odds." That's a phrase from the Notre Dame fight song.

Cheer, cheer for Haley Scott DeMaria.

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