

# Single-Parent • Family™

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**Camps  
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**Save Money  
And Eat Well**

**How to Avoid  
Rescuing Your Teen**

*A 'Single Mother'  
Overcomes the Past*

*Letting Go,  
Moving On*

# After years of trauma with her disabled husband, Letting Go, Moving On

BY THERESA MCKENNA

Just like in a storybook—Scott, a tall, athletic Stanford graduate, met Phyllis, a smart, attractive secretary. They loved God. They loved each other. They married in 1977.

By 1988, their home in Monterey, Calif., echoed with the laughter of three children—Brooke, Forrest and Spencer. The Oswalds were involved in several ministries at their church. Following the plan they were sure God had for them, they lived in a world reminiscent of “Leave It to Beaver.”

But then their world began to disintegrate.

“Scott said he dreamed of ministering to hurting people at a home with a guest house on an island,” says Phyllis, who was interviewed for this article last December. “He always had a strong relationship with the Lord, so I was not surprised when he said he thought it was prophetic.”

When she asked him where the island was, he said it was near Seattle, where he had been raised. Both took the dream seriously and agreed to seek God’s plan.

“I think we both wondered if we had lost our minds,” Phyllis says. “But we decided to step out in faith.”

Six months later, Scott put their home on the market and gave notice to his employer, a food supplement company, that he would be leaving his job as general manager.



Phyllis and her three children—Brooke, Forrest and Spencer—at their home on Mercer Island in Washington.

## PLANS GONE AWRY

It was May 18, 1989. The day seemed like any other—children’s busy chatter, housework, errands. Phyllis put dinner on, picked up the kids’ dirty clothes, tidied the house. Scott had been on a business trip to Seattle all week and would be back that night.

“Hi, Honey,” he said, catching her in the kids’ room putting clothes away.

“Hi, Scott!” she said, smiling. They embraced.

“You’re the best mom in the world,” he said, eyeing the clothes she had gathered. “I love you.”

Scott hugged the boys, then told Phyllis he was going back out to attend a goodbye party for a friend at work.

“Phyllis, why don’t you come with me?” he said.

“I can’t get a sitter this late, Honey,” she said. “Just go for a short while.”

They agreed, and he left.

Scott did not come home that night. Worried, Phyllis called a few friends who had attended the party. They told her he had left hours before.

At 7 the next morning, the phone rang.

“Is this Phyllis Oswald?” asked a woman’s uneasy voice.

“Yes, this is Phyllis.”

## *Phyllis Oswald triumphs as a single parent.*

"Is Scott Oswald your husband?"

"Yes."

Silence.

"There's been an accident," the woman said. "You need to come to the Santa Cruz Hospital right away."

"What is it?" Phyllis asked, pressing the receiver next to her cheek and breathing heavily into the phone.

More silence.

"Just come right now, but don't come alone," the woman said. "All I can tell you is that Scott's leg is broken and he is in a coma."

Phyllis prepared the kids for school. She told them something had happened to Daddy, but that they shouldn't be afraid. Once they were out the door, a friend arrived to pick up Phyllis and they headed toward Santa Cruz.

### **HURRYING TO THE UNKNOWN**

The 45-minute drive seemed like an eternity. As they turned off the ramp leading to the hospital, Phyllis prayed aloud, "Lord, help me get through this."

Inside, she learned what had happened: Scott's car had smashed into a metal pole near a gas station. He was alone and no one knew why it had happened. He had a broken neck and jaw, a hangman's fracture, a leg broken in three places, and massive brain damage. He was in a coma and probably wouldn't make it.

"People don't live through accidents like this," the paramedics confirmed to Phyllis, who was still dizzy from her race to the hospital. "They just don't."

But Scott did. During the next few days, Brooke, Forrest and Spencer

**Summer  
vacation  
of 1986.**



visited their daddy in the hospital. Mom warned them things would be different, but they already knew. They stared at their once-vibrant dad, now lying immobile. Tears fell. At his side, Phyllis

was a mannequin, stiff and numb. She had to muster the courage to stand strong for them—and for herself.

"After the accident, I completely shut down," she remembers. "I functioned physically and mentally, but emotionally I was totally out of it."

"I was confused," she says. "I asked God, 'Why did this happen? What about the plan You had for us?'"

*Their home  
echoed with  
the laughter  
of their  
three children.*

### **SOMETHING TO HOLD ON TO**

As days turned to weeks, and weeks to months, Scott lay motionless in a hospital bed. In desperation, Phyllis cried out for God's help. She felt He spoke to her through His Word:

"By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see" (Acts 3:16).

Phyllis wept. She wondered

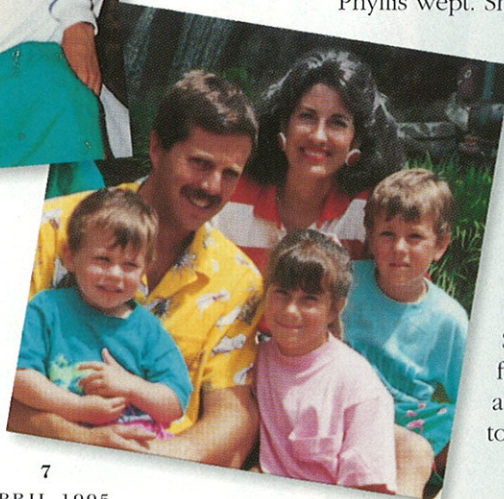
if this meant He would heal Scott.

Two months after the accident, the Oswalds' house sold. Phyllis felt God leading her to move to Seattle. She packed up the family and found an apartment close to her husband's

**Scott and  
Phyllis,  
one month  
before Scott's  
accident,  
in May 1989.**



**Two weeks  
before Scott's  
accident.**



family. She had Scott transported there by air ambulance.

But the move didn't change anything. Scott remained in a coma. Phyllis tried a parade of hospitals, nursing homes and therapists. Though Scott seemed responsive, he could not speak or move. He was fed through a tube and given round-the-clock care.

"I functioned on a high energy level because I had to," Phyllis says. "There were so many things to do—dealing with doctors and insurance, medical bills, hospitals, therapists, making decisions about Scott. When we were able to buy a house, I looked for one to accommodate him, as I thought I could care for him best at home."

She settled on a house. But soon after the move, Phyllis realized she was falling apart. The stress on her physical body was undeniable, and her emotional struggles were just as real.

"Moving into the house triggered a response in me I was not prepared for," she says, adding that she had never wanted to be anything more than Scott's wife. "I began to realize we were moving on and Scott was not part of it. I used to think the worst thing that could happen to me would be to have Scott die, but this was worse. I never imagined life could be so hard, that I could feel so much pain, that it could keep going on for so long."

In May 1992, Phyllis brought Scott home. The master bedroom had been remodeled to accommodate him, with a ramp and a deck added. Friends donated money and labor to help Phyllis realize her dream of having Scott with the family again.



**The accident,  
May 19, 1989.**

*"I used to think  
the worst thing that  
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### **CHANGE OF PLANS**

Medicare would not pay for Scott to stay at home. And Phyllis, who could no longer handle caring for him alone, struggled to find qualified help. Phyllis was forced to put Scott back in the nursing home. Disillusioned about having spent so much money to remodel the house, she questioned God.

"I felt as though the plan had changed and I was the last to be informed," she says. "I was very confused, because God didn't seem to be talking to me.

"I have learned what it means to have a dream die," she declares, adding that God has used pain to draw her closer to Him. "Our family is nothing like I thought it would be. But I believe God sometimes gives us a dream and then asks us to let it go. After all personal attachments are removed, He resurrects it in His own time and in His own way. Then He gets all the glory."

After she put Scott back in the nursing home, Phyllis became convinced that God was asking her to set aside her vision for Scott's healing.

"God asked me to let it go and get out of the way," she says. "For several years, my faith in Scott's eventual healing kept me going. Perhaps my idea of healing was different from what God had in mind."

But as much as she wanted to leave the situation in God's hands,

**Christmas,  
1989.**



**On Mercer  
Island,  
fall 1991.**



**A 1994 vacation  
that bonded the Oswalds  
as a single-parent family.**

Phyllis still had questions after Scott reentered the nursing home. In one of her January 1994 journal entries, she wrote:

“Scott has been my priority all these years, and now I feel the need to put him third on the list after the children and me. Are these thoughts from God, or is Satan trying to distract me? Why is God so quiet when I feel as if my insides are being torn apart? Doesn't He care what I am going through?”



**HARD CHOICES**

“Wanting to hang on to Scott's healing was about *me*, the woman who likes romance and tenderness,” Phyllis now says. “I love my husband and miss him. But feeling all those emotions was too scary for me. So I put them to rest. Eventually, I began to feel needs and desires I had not allowed myself to acknowledge. I didn't know what to do with them. But God knew that I had to face them.

“God asked me to allow Him to be my husband,” she says. “It meant giving Him all my emotional needs, my deep desire for intimacy and my search for a feeling of worth. I think it took the deep pain of Scott's accident to allow me to come to terms with who I am as a child of God apart from my husband.

“This is a tough place. I realize I don't fit into any category. I am a married single mother. I am not single, but I am married and parenting alone. In all these six years, I have met only one other person in a similar situation.”

**MOVING ON**

These days, Phyllis is at the Leadership Institute of Seattle, earning an undergraduate degree in applied behavioral science. She knows that Scott, apart from his brain damage, is in good physical health and may live to 60 years of age. But she's moving ahead with life.

Above all, she wants to be a good

*“I think it took  
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**Phyllis, Spencer and Forrest talk with Gary Lydic at a 1994 Focus on the Family basketball camp in Seattle.**

mom to her three kids. Though raising them alone has been tough, she feels they have adjusted well to their new lives.

“We were all in counseling, which was a great help,” she says. “The children do not feel hostility toward their father as they would if there had been a divorce, but they *are* experiencing abandonment.”

After Scott's accident, Forrest and Spencer were accepted into a Big Brothers program at a time when they were struggling most. And she says Focus on the Family's basketball camp, designed particularly for children from single-parent homes (see pages 10-12), has had an even more significant influence on their lives.

“When I sat in the stands and watched Forrest play,” Phyllis says, “I felt a deep grief that Scott was not there to see him. And if I felt that grief, how much more was Forrest feeling it? That camp came at a critical time—when my sons were beginning to become whole again.”

While at the camp, the boys learned about another vision—only this one is still alive.

She notes that Focus has taken over the dream of the late pro basketball star Pete Maravich to hold basketball camps for youngsters. “My boys recognize that it is possible for someone to have a dream game going, and then be called out of the game before it is over, just as their dad was. It is at those times that someone else must pick up the ball and go on to win the game.”

“I don't know what lies ahead for us,” she says. “God can take Scott home, He can heal Scott, or we can all stay the same. But it really doesn't matter anymore. I have peace that God has become my husband. Whatever He chooses for me will be okay.” ■

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