

The meaning of courage

Searching for strength and meaning after tragedy

By Jane Meyer
Mercer Island Reporter

Phyllis Oswald has a stack of photographs, carefully labeled, arranged by number, held together with a rubber band. She calls it her photo journal.

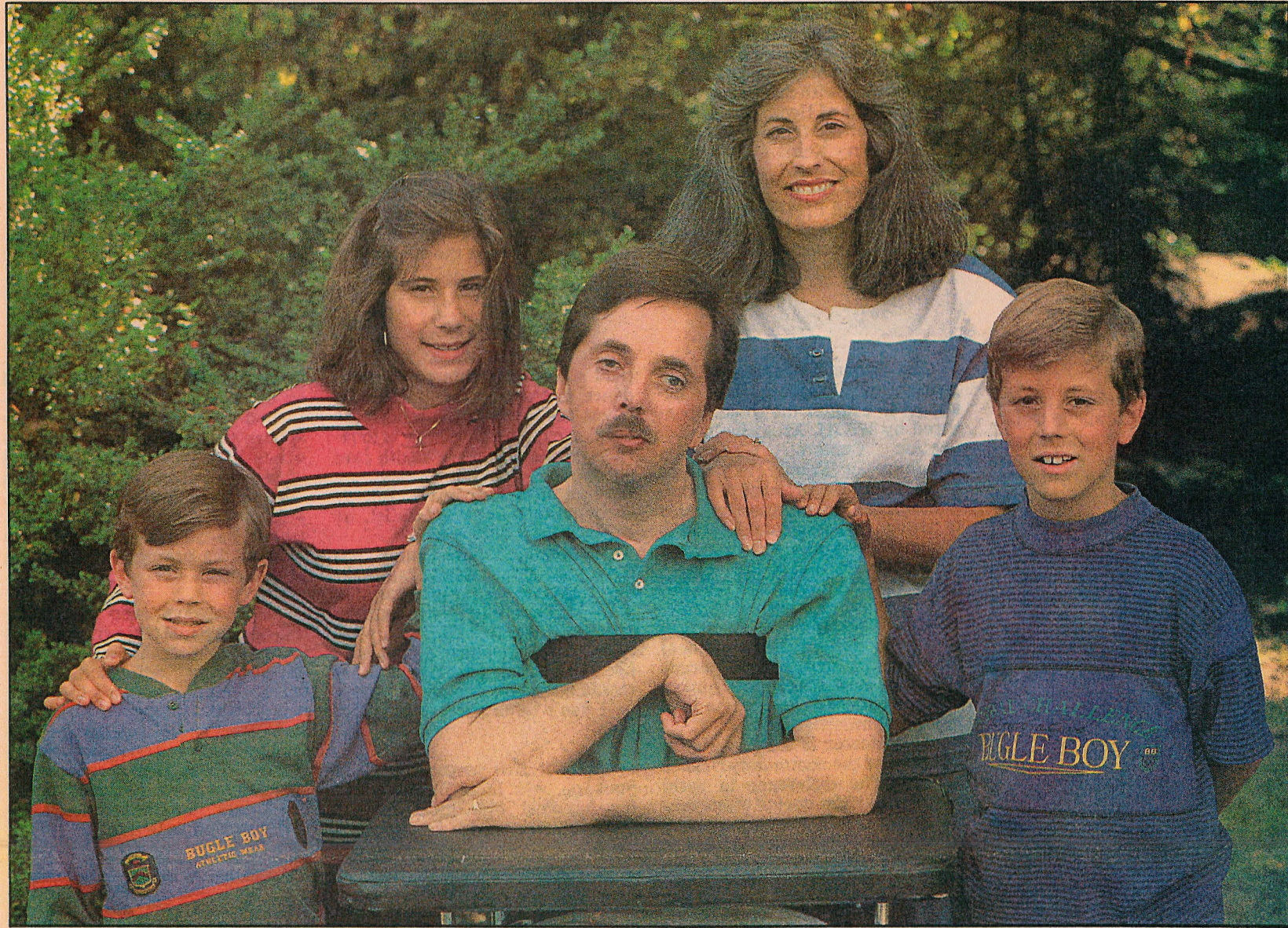
Sometimes, it speaks more eloquently than words ever could about what the Oswald family has been through these past three years.

April, 1989: Snapshots show Phyllis, Scott, and their three children, Brooke, 9, Forrest, 6, and Spencer, 3, on a family trip to Hawaii and then to Disneyland. Smiling faces, sunny beaches, the kids playing, and Scott, 35, tanned and athletic, on a windsurfer.

May, 19, 1989: Accident photos show what a car looks like when it smashes into a pole at 55 mph. Scott Oswald was alone, driving to work in Santa Cruz, Calif., that morning. No one knows what made him slump over the wheel with his foot on the accelerator. He was taking a new medication that may have made him sleepy - but no one will ever know for sure.

He had a broken neck -- a C-2 fracture, sometimes called the "hangman's fracture." His leg was broken in three places, and he had a number of other broken bones. And there was extensive damage to his brain.

"People don't live through



The Oswald family, left to right, are Spencer, 6, Brooke, 12, Scott, Phyllis, and Forrest, 9. It's been three years since the car accident that rendered

Scott quadriplegic and unable to speak. After being in seven different institutions, he's now living at home on Mercer Island.

Bob DeLashmutt

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“People don’t live through accidents like this,” the police officer told Phyllis. But Scott lived.

MORE PHOTOS chronicle the course of the three years since the accident that changed their lives forever. Scott in intensive care. Scott in the special “roto-rest” bed. Scott’s first day sitting in a chair. His 36th birthday, with his daughter holding a T-shirt she’d painted for him, with the words, “Jesus can heal you.” Scott’s first day outside, two and a half months after the accident. The first day without a neck brace. “We have photos of all the ‘firsts,’” said Phyllis. “They seemed so significant at the time. . .” she said, her voice trailing off.

But photos don’t depict the world of hospitals and rehabilitation units, of insurance paperwork and red tape that Phyllis entered. And they don’t tell of the friends and acquaintances who have stepped in with support and help. And photos can never tell the story of this family’s pain and the tears, or of their courage and love.

Scott was in a coma for a year. He is paralyzed except for some left arm movement. He cannot speak: he cannot communicate. No one knows how much he understands, but his expression changes to indicate he does recognize some people. Once in a while, often at unexpected moments, he laughs.

BEFORE THE accident, Phyllis and Scott had always intended to move from California back to Mercer Island, where

Scott grew up and where his parents still live. So in the fall of 1989, five months after the accident, Phyllis decided they would move back, to be near his parents. She and the children moved into Shorewood Apartments, and Scott, still in a coma, was placed in the rehab unit at Northwest Hospital.

Scott’s parents were glad to have their son and his family nearby, so they could be helpful and supportive. “Scott’s our son, and Phyllis is a blessing for him,” said Olive Oswald. “This is a difficult, ongoing thing - and so often it tears families apart. . . But there have been many blessings and miracles along the way.”

A patient can remain in a rehab unit only if he is improving, so in May, 1990, Scott was moved to Mercer Island Care Center, then to Highline Hospital, then to the Bessie Burton Sullivan Skilled Nursing Residence. Last year, Phyllis and the children moved into a home on Mercer Island. With the help of friends, she had the master bedroom remodeled and a ramp built to accommodate Scott. “He had been in seven different institutions in the past three years,” said Phyllis. “I thought we could do a better job of caring for Scott at home, and I felt he needed it emotionally.” He moved home with them in May.

“**I USED TO IMAGINE** that the worst thing that could ever happen to me was having my husband die and being left alone,” said Phyllis. “But something worse happened to me.”

It took two years for the weight

‘When I look at him, I see the man I married, not the crippled man I take care of.’

– Phyllis Oswald

of her burden to come crashing down on her. “For two years, I had completely shut down emotionally,” she said. “I functioned because there was so much I had to do – dealing with doctors and insurance, medical bills, making decisions about Scott, selling the house in California, moving.” Taking care of things was her protective device. Only at night, when she was alone, did the enormity of her situation begin to sink in - and she would cry herself to sleep.

But it was last fall, two years after the accident, that she began to grieve. It was triggered by a trip to Sun River with friends – a repeat of a trip she and Scott had made every year for a decade. Everywhere there were memories of Scott – of the bike rides, the hiking, the swimming, the good times. The sense of loss was overwhelming.

About the same time, she and her children were moving from Shorewood into a house on Mercer Island. “I didn’t understand what was happening to me,” she said. “I cried all the time. I began to realize I’d been putting the pain in a box and putting on the lid,” she

said. “Last fall, it all came out. . . It took me six weeks of crying to find out what was wrong with me,” she said. Moving into the house meant they were starting to gain some stability in their lives – and the realization that Scott wasn’t there for them, now or ever.

Sometimes, someone gives voice to the inevitable questions: What kind of a future does Phyllis have? Why doesn’t she divorce Scott and get on with her life?

“People don’t understand. I still love him,” she said simply. “When I look at him, I see the man I married, not the crippled man I take care of.”

She knows the statistics – that 80 percent of people in her situation divorce the spouse. In fact, she believes it’s probably more like 90 or 95 percent. “But when I married Scott I made a commitment, a vow ‘in sickness and in health, for better or worse.’ I don’t know if someday I’ll say I can’t do this anymore. But I still love him even though he can’t give anything back. There’s no one to fill my cup back up. . . The hardest thing for me is the deep, aching loneliness. I miss him terribly.”

A WEDDING PHOTO hangs in the master bedroom of the Oswald home – Phyllis and Scott, young and hopeful, looking to the future on their wedding day, Dec. 17, 1977. The son of Olive and Hugo Oswald, Scott grew up on Mercer Island, graduated from Stanford University, and earned an MBA degree in finance from the University of Washington.

Scott and Phyllis had met in California through their church – both sang for services. They were young, in love, and the whole world was ahead of them.

Today, Scott’s world is the peaceful bedroom of their Mercer Island home. Phyllis worried at first that bringing Scott home might be especially hard on the children, and that seeing him all the time would remind them of their loss.

“But having him here has brought a greater sense of stability for us as a family,” she said. The children used to hate going to the nursing home – now they spend time with their father as they come and go in their daily activities. Brooke had a slumber party and brought all her friends in to meet her dad. And Forrest and Spencer come in to spend time watching TV with their dad. “I’m touched to see how they still love him so much,” said Phyllis.

While it’s been a blessing to have Scott at home, the reality is that they may not be able to keep him there. Medicaid paid for his nursing home care, but pays nothing for his care since he’s at home. He requires heavy care: he is fed through a tube, needs lifting, showering, dressing, physical therapy, turning when he’s in bed. The Oswalds have had a friend who has served as an aide to help with Scott for the past few months. But he will be leaving soon. And the family income – Social Security and disability payments – is enough to cover basic needs, but not

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medical expenses or the cost of hiring an aide.

"People have advised me to consider divorcing Scott, so he would become a ward of the state and be taken care of," Phyllis said. "But because I have chosen to stay with my husband, and because we have children, we don't qualify for an aide in the home. Medicaid was paying \$3,500 a month for the nursing home; now that he's here, it pays nothing. It seems like such an injustice. . . I'm losing my fight," she continued. "I've fought for Scott at every turn, with the government, with rehab, with doctors, with the insurance people. And I'm so tired out."

SHE IS frustrated by her situation, but grateful for the help

and love which individuals have shown. There have been many who have helped: Shirley Lake, who donated her real estate commission to help pay for remodeling the house; Teresa McKenna, owner of Dore, who donated fabrics, upholstery and time in remodeling the bedroom for Scott; Dan the contractor and members of Vineyard Christian Fellowship Church in Kirkland who helped with cabinets, carpentry, tile and and electrical work; Nathan Martin who has been helping with Scott's care; Gary Schultz of Hedmans, who cuts hair for the family; Jolene Hiltner, Mary Keith, Mark Kershner, Dave and Betsy Biehn, Milt Yanicks and members of Mercer Island Presbyterian Church who spend time with Scott or helped in other ways.

"Scott used to tell me, 'If somebody wants to give to you, and you don't let them, you rob them of a blessing,'" explained Phyllis. She said she think about his words frequently now, because she needs help and has had to learn to accept it. Sometimes, it's been very lonely, when people have stayed away because they've been uncomfortable, or afraid to feel her pain. In a quick-fix society, people are uncomfortable when they can't "fix" something. "We're not fixable," she said. "We're still needy. People have done so many wonderful things for us. But our situation is long term."

It's her faith in God, ultimately; which sustains Phyllis. "Scott and I met in the church, and it was the center of

our relationship," she said. "It's one thing to believe in God, and it's another to realize God really gives you the strength to face each day. Each day is a victory. . . It took me months to say it would have been easier if Scott had died. There would have been a finality there. . . I don't think much about the future. I take one day at a time. Some day, perhaps I'll look back and wonder why did I struggle so."

Editor's note: A new care program of Mercer Island Presbyterian Church, where Scott's parents have been congregants for more than 40 years, has undertaken to offer special help to the Oswald family. Anyone interested in helping is invited to contact the coordinator, Mary Keith, at 232-6140.

Editorials

The quiet courage of Phyllis Oswald

When we speak of courage, too often we look at single acts of heroism that are fleeting moments in a person's life. But there's another kind of courage - the kind it takes to live day in and day out with whatever obstacle life has thrown at you. The kind of courage exemplified by Phyllis Oswald and her family.

The Oswald family, featured in last week's *Reporter*, has suffered a tragedy of the worst kind. An accident left Scott Oswald, husband of Phyllis and father of three, a quadriplegic who also is unable to communicate.

It took a quiet courage for Phyllis to continue with her life, to bring her husband home, to honor her marriage vows, to ask for and receive help, to face the challenges of each day.

There's nothing glamorous about the Oswald family; there's no happy ending; no magic cure.

But the life she and her family are living speaks to true courage - the kind that seldom makes headlines, but the kind which will sustain her and her family, no matter what life brings.

In a year when "family values" have become a national debate, most would agree that the quiet courage of Phyllis Oswald is teaching her family and this community what "family values" are all about: caring, love and commitment.