Struck by an arrow, paralyzed boy makes comeback

Kirsten Bressler will never forget the day she lived every mother's worst fear.

“I received a phone call from my 15-year-old son, frantic,” Bressler says. “Couldn’t quite understand him. Told me to hurry up and get home. There’d been an accident.”

It quickly became clear that this accident would change her life.

After Kirsten’s 15-year-old middle son, Tucker, hung up with her, he called 911. He told Mayo Clinic Emergency Medical Dispatcher Denise Borgschatz that he was shooting his bow, and the arrow ricocheted off the target and hit his little brother. He told Borgschatz that his brother, 8-year-old Curtis Bressler, was still awake and breathing.

“Once I found out what part of the body it was that he was hit, I automatically auto-launched a helicopter,” Borgschatz later recalled.

Jessica Fite, who is a flight paramedic at Mayo Clinic, was on the helicopter that responded to the Bressler home in Truman, Minnesota.

“For the rest of my career, I will never forget the sinking feeling I had in my stomach when we opened those ambulance doors, and here you see this little guy with an arrow ticking straight out of his chest,” Fite says.

As Fite and local medics from Truman Ambulance began preparing Curtis for the flight, Kirsten reassured her son that she loved him, and he was in very good care.

But Fite says things took an unexpected turn in the air.

“It didn’t even occur to us that this could be a spinal injury until somebody had said he’s not moving from the waist down,” Fite says. “And we verified that.”

Dr. Denise Klinkner, a pediatric surgeon at Mayo Clinic, figured out why Curtis wasn’t moving from the waist down when he arrived in the Emergency Department at Mayo Clinic Hospital – Rochester, Saint Marys Campus.

“He had missed a lot of very important structures here, but clearly had injured his spine,” Dr. Klinkner says.

Dr. Klinkner and Dr. Nick Wetjen, a pediatric neurosurgeon at Mayo Clinic, had to figure out how to remove the arrow without causing any more damage.

“The spinal cord had been severed,” Dr. Wetjen says. “The arrow head had went through the bone and right directly through the spinal cord itself.”
“I didn’t expect him to be able to walk again.”

Kirsten had to come to terms with that quickly.

“It’s OK,” she says. “I’m like he’s with us, ‘cause they told us it had missed his pulmonary arter, his aorta and his heart, which he would have bled out on the spot. And my husband and I wouldn’t have been able to say goodbye to him by the time we got there. So I was very thankful and sad at the same time.”

Kirsten waited for the right moment to tell her son his fate: that he was now a paraplegic.

“I said, ‘You will be able to do everything everybody else does; you will just do it differently.’ I’m like, ‘You will be able to play basketball. You will, you know, be able to do everything anybody else does.’”

But the 8-year-old boy with the severed spine did not believe the doctors who told him that he would never walk again.

“Not true,” Curtis says. “I felt that way.”

Kirsten says her son’s recovery seems to prove that.

“As each tube came out of him, he got stronger,” she says.

Curtis started rehab and physical therapy. He started getting sensations and feeling back. He was getting used to his wheelchair, but he was not satisfied.

Then one day, he shocked his family and doctors.

“All the sudden, he walked into the room,” Kirsten says.

For Drs. Klinkner and Wetjen, it was baffling.

“It’s really quite incredible recovery, given the severity of the injury he had,” Wetjen says.

Dr. Klinkner agrees.

“Sometimes, we don’t have explanations from a medical standpoint,” Dr. Klinkner says. “But, with this kind of outcome, I’m OK not having an explanation.”

Curtis’ progress continues to defy odds and explanation.
“He is now doing heel and toe-walking, tippy-toe walking and heel-walking,” Kirsten says. “And he jumped yesterday. And that brought tears to my eyes.”

Despite his mother telling him he could do everything anybody else could - just differently - roughly two months later, Curtis is playing basketball exactly like everyone else.

“It’s truly a miracle,” Kirsten says.

And this miracle is having an inspiring impact on those who helped save Curtis.

“He is amazing,” Borgschatz says. “I almost wanted to cry when I saw him walking.”

“In this job, you have to believe there’s miracles out there, I think.”

Fite is just as ready to believe.

“He is beyond lucky,” she says. “I’m so grateful for him that it turned out the way it did.”

But nobody is as pleased or as proud of Curtis’ progress as his mother is.

“We knew he was something else,” Kirsten says. “Something bigger was happening. And he has truly amazed us. He continues to amaze us.”

Now an 8-year-old boy who refused to believe he would never walk again, looks forward to getting back to playing soccer and riding his family’s John Deere tractor.

Curtis is so confident he will fully recover that he thinks that one day all he’s gone through since being shot with an arrow will be nothing more than a distant memory.