

New awakening

Bree Kirwin

Bree Kirwin is the first to confess that although she will never consider nine to be one of her lucky numbers, she will forever be reminded of the significance it has had on her life. It was on 9/9/1999 that Bree suffered a near-fatal car accident, ultimately leaving her in a coma for three months.

Upon waking, Bree was determined to regain some degree of normality in her life. Describing herself as an extremely active person before her accident, she was thrust into the position of forcing her body to relearn the basics.

‘When you’ve got to sort of relearn everything it’s amazing how hard it is,’ the 31-year-old says. ‘Even lying in bed and learning to get out of bed... and sitting to stand. You just take a lot of things for granted now.’

‘In my opinion, my brain was working okay, so I thought if I get walking then everything will fall back into place. So yeah, that was the one thing I focused on more so than anything.’

It was during Bree’s initial recovery at Ivanhoe Manor Private Hospital that she met Carlee Holmes, APAM.

‘Carlee was with me from the start. She taught me to go from lying to sitting, transferring to and from my bed and wheelchair and to a standing position,’ Bree says. ‘She was so gentle so as not to submit my body to too much pain and discomfort, yet

persistent enough to advance my progress.

‘Carlee always knew just what to do and what to say to make me feel good about myself and make me want to do better.’

It was through this close association with Carlee that Bree was able to set for herself clear goals and constantly push herself to excel. So much so, that despite the intense pain, Bree was determined to reach her objective of having as normal a life as possible. In fact, such was her ambition that she was soon requesting extra classes.

‘At times, I won’t lie, I dreaded physio,’ Bree admits. ‘It was hard and very painful, but I was always determined to walk again, and Carlee was there to encourage and support me.’

When asked about the most significant driving factor behind her willpower and resolve at the time, Bree laughs. ‘Stupidity!’

‘I’m a pretty stubborn and determined person... you just want to beat it,’ she says. ‘I guess I kind of set it as a bit of a test for myself to get better.’

Like many patients using physiotherapy as a vehicle for recovery, Bree became addicted to achieving what was considered impossible only weeks earlier. With each new exercise she mastered, each new movement she attempted, she was able to impress herself more and more.

When asked about which aspects of her physiotherapy

treatment she felt provided the most significant results, Bree answers the question in two very different ways.

Initially, she highlights the refreshing experience of hydrotherapy treatment during her recovery. ‘I thought it was really fantastic,’ she says, ‘it was like it put a force-field around me... all the balance came back. All I could do in water, there is no way I could do on dry land.’

‘It made you feel like you were back to normal.’

But then, on a different note, Bree insists that the time she spent with the neurological physiotherapist away from Ivanhoe Manor Private Rehabilitation Hospital had just as much impact on her progress as the experiences within.

‘Carlee didn’t only take me for physio in the physio room,’ she begins, ‘Carlee would take me on walks to the shops, parks, etc, to make physio more interesting and to get me to be able to start doing “normal” everyday things again.’

‘It sort of broke the monotony a bit.’

The bond between physiotherapist and patient was further strengthened amidst the continuing hardships that they endured during Bree’s treatment. An extreme example of this occurred when Bree developed an eating disorder during her recovery. It meant that she was cast into yet another personal battle that threatened to derail her life.

‘The accident almost killed me but then the anorexia could have as well,’ Bree says, ‘so it was a pretty emotional time for my family.’

It was during this period that Carlee’s role with Bree took on another, added dimension. Always a pillar of strength for her patient, Carlee had to help further educate Bree in regards to nutrition, healthy living, and positive thinking.

‘She [Carlee] has done more [for me] than just physiotherapy,’ Bree admits.

One of the residual effects of Bree’s accident that has greatly affected her in recent times has been issues with her circulation. Bree has Raynaud’s syndrome and was forced to make the decision of whether to move to a warmer climate or face the possibility of losing her toes. Without hesitation, she chose the latter, and now happily resides in sunny Queensland.

So while Bree may no longer be in the same state as Carlee, their friendship continues. They occasionally talk and Bree does not think twice about sending off an email when she needs advice or help.

‘It is almost 13 years since my accident and now I am walking and living a pretty normal life. I believe that together we accomplished what I was told would never happen, but with us both giving 110 per cent I got there,’ she says.

Carlee Holmes

Working at Ivanhoe Manor Private Rehabilitation Hospital, Carlee Holmes has accrued an abundant amount of experience working with patients with severe head injuries. It was in this setting that she first encountered Bree Kirwin, who would later herald the physiotherapist's support as having a deeply profound effect on her life.

'At the start of her treatment she was very much a raw, head-injured patient with big inhibition, an inability to move independently, and requiring a lot of physical support. Her speech was very difficult to understand...', Carlee says. 'She just gradually chipped away at everything and it all improved.'

'She was extremely motivated.' Largely following the Bobath approach to patient physio-

therapy, Carlee opted to instead use a combined approach when treating Bree. Working with the patient both as an inpatient and later as an outpatient, she experienced first-hand Bree's determined mindset and gradual improvement.

'[Initially] she was largely wheelchair bound and using an electric-powered wheelchair... then that changed to just using it for longer outings and now she's on her feet again,' she says.

Significantly, Carlee speaks of the importance of being able to read Bree's moods and overall psyche throughout her treatment, and adjusting the therapy accordingly. She believes that this was crucial to maintain the patient's motivation throughout her recovery. Moreover, such an advanced degree of mutual understanding epitomises the

great rapport she was able to build with Bree.

'Every now and again she'd come in and I could tell that if we did the usual standard physio sort of stuff that it would be of no benefit to her...' she says.

The neurological physiotherapist mirrors Bree's previous assertion that often it was these periods away from the therapy rooms that had an immense therapeutic impact on Bree's fragile disposition.

'We'd be better off going for a walk and having a chat... go outside and try and throw a ball... something fun,' she says.

Speaking specifically of Bree's struggles with anorexia during her recovery from her accident, Carlee cites the associated difficulties that arose in her physiotherapy. A fine balance needed to be observed to ensure that the

recovering, underweight patient did not over-exert herself. Such a difficulty was uncharted territory for the experienced physiotherapist, but she was determined to encourage her patient to reach her goal of walking again.

'A lot of head-injured patients put on weight and Bree did... because they're less mobile,' she says. 'But then being the motivated person that she is, she wanted to lose weight again and it went to the extreme.'

Looking back, Carlee seems quietly proud of her involvement in Bree's inspirational transformation.

'There were the times, I guess, when it wasn't pure physiotherapy,' she says, '... there's really no point to the physiotherapy if you don't understand the person.'