

## INJURED GIRL IS ON A MISSION

# Teen equestrian works to ride again

BY TRACEE M. HERBAUGH  
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

When 13-year-old Leighton Heisey's mother received a call saying her equestrian daughter was thrown from a horse this summer, she didn't worry much. Riding almost every day for eight years, Leighton had been thrown off horses a number of times.

But this accident left the Scotch Plains resident with a brain injury and paralysed on her right side, and doctors placed her in a medically induced coma.

Only after months of intensive therapy — as many as 10 appointments a week to work on her speech and movement — is she starting to regain her independence and live as she did before the accident.

During a riding lesson on Aug. 4, Leighton's horse got spooked for an unknown reason, throwing her to the ground, and then it stepped on her neck. She suffered a traumatic brain injury and a subsequent stroke. By the time her father arrived, she was semi-conscious with her eyes barely open and her right arm cradling her stomach.

"The initial injuries were bruises on the brain and a left-side stroke, which was unusual for a head injury," said Krishan Yalamanchi, director of the brain injury program at Children's Specialized Hospital in New Brunswick. "The stroke was caused by a compression on the neck, and it complicated her clinical condition."

Leighton spent the first six days of her 10-day stay at Morristown Memorial Hospital sedated, with all of her vital functions supported by machines allowing her brain to rest. Slowly, doctors eased her off the sedatives and began to see progress. Leighton started to swallow on her own and soon after began to say words.

She was transferred to Children's Specialized Hospital in New Brunswick to begin a six-week inpatient recovery.

Her parents altered their work schedules, so one could stay with Leighton and the other with their two younger children at home in Scotch Plains. Dave Heisey, principal of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School, was preparing to start the school year in a few weeks.

In New Brunswick, Leighton had to relearn rudimentary skills such as balance and walking and slowly started regaining her speech.

"At first, our short-term goals were just for her to know that she had a left side," said her father. "Her language was developing as a child's would, but very quickly."

Yalamanchi said it could take anywhere from two to three years for Leighton's cognitive functioning to get back to where she was before the accident — an eighth-grade honors student at Park Middle School in Scotch Plains.

Throughout, the family tried to keep a positive attitude.

"I got to spend a lot of one-on-one time in the hospital just getting to know my daughter," said Margaret Heisey, Leighton's mother.

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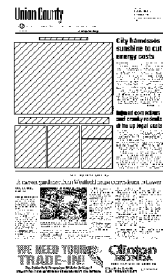
"We all get busy in life, but something like this really forces you to take time out, because you have to. I would never want this to happen to anyone, but you've got to look at the positives."

Now, back at home three months later, Leighton is walking, though her balance is a bit off. She can speak again, but can get frustrated by the lingering inability to recall certain words such as the prepositions used to string a sentence together. And she still hasn't recovered total control of her right arm and hand.

Much of her weekly therapy at the Children's Specialized Hospital branch in Mountainside is devoted to recovering her balance skills and control of her arm. Once a week, she and her therapist work in a swimming pool, reaching for rings at the bottom. To assist with her balance, Leighton rides a therapeutic horse, which is led by a trainer with a leash.

The Heisey family and Leighton's therapists still do not know when she might be able to return to school. Some therapists suggested January, but caution that it is still a day-to-day struggle.

"It's a miracle how far she has



come," her mother said. "It's amazing how much they've been able to do for her and what will be done in the future."

For Leighton, it is a priority to recover fully so she can continue to ride horses competitively.

"I'm not nervous," Leighton said of getting back on a horse. "I

really want to get my hand working again so I can ride. It's my mission."

*Tracee M. Herbaugh is a reporter for the New Jersey Local News Service. She may be reached at [therbaugh@njlns.com](mailto:therbaugh@njlns.com) or (908) 243-6214.*



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**Leighton Heisey, 13, of Scotch Plains, with Fedex, a therapy horse at Seaton Hackney Stables in Morristown. This summer, Leighton was thrown from a horse and suffered a brain injury and paralysis on her right side. She is undergoing therapy as part of her recovery.**