

The Gift of the Orange Bracelet

When I answered the phone call from my sister, I immediately knew by the sound of her voice that something was wrong. At that moment, she was in crisis mode, but there also was a strange sense of peace in her tone as if she knew the outcome was out of her control. We cried together as she told me what had happened. Her daughter, my Godchild, had been in a terrible one-car accident hours earlier on her way home from high school soccer practice, less than a mile from their home. The SUV had burst into flames and she was pinned in the vehicle. If it wasn't for the quick response of some "hero neighbors and passers by", she would have most likely died in the vehicle. She was then medflighted to Massachusetts General Hospital with burns over 70% of her body from her chest down, and her feet which had been pinned were charred to the bone. She also hit her head, so they needed to make sure there were no problems with her brain before they would send her to the Burn Unit at the Shriners Hospital right next door. She was put into a drugged-induced coma as they did their best to stabilize her. As I hung up the phone, I did not know there was such a thing as fourth degree burns, and I also had no idea how the impact of this event would forever change all of our lives. The first night was touch and go as to whether or not she would even make it, but after a few days, she began to stabilize. The news of her accident paralyzed her hometown, but her fellow teammates, classmates, teachers, and coaches sprang into action. Everyone came together and the idea of raising funds for her medical expenses began. One of the many ideas was selling orange rubber bracelets, which was her favorite color, with the words Carrie Bear # 18 (her soccer number) inscribed on it. She was an outstanding soccer goalie and was being heavily recruited by multiple Division 1 schools. When I heard about the bracelets I bought enough to last a while and started wearing it on my right wrist in her support. Following a very difficult week at Massachusetts General Hospital, she did show enough improvement to be transferred through the underground tunnel to the Shriners Hospital. This is where my journey began to take shape. I went to visit my sister's family and Godchild at the Shriners Hospital with my Mom, a retired RN who adored her granddaughter and had a very strong bond with her. I did not last very long in her room the first time, as I found myself overwhelmed by the very distinct odor of burnt flesh and became light headed and nauseous, but I did get the sense that she was in very good hands. I expected my sister and brother-in-law to be frantic, but found them to be oddly at ease, considering the situation they were in. As my Mother and I went to the hotel that evening, Mom commented at the battery of nurses and doctors that were attending to her granddaughter, and how they were so knowledgeable and made her feel welcomed and comfortable. I also found out that day that all of her medical care at the Shriners was free. How could that be? Who was paying for it? They also gave my sister and her husband an apartment to live in just a few floors below their daughter as she recovered so they wouldn't have to drive the two hour round trip home everyday. When I went to the apartment I noticed the Orange Bracelets scattered on one of the tables. My brother-in-law commented numerous times about how burn victims from all over the world are flown into the Boston Shriners Hospital Burn Unit for treatment. I also noticed in the

lobby of the hospital numerous plaques with names of donors who have given hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Shriners Hospitals. Who were these people and what inspired them to give so much back? Where they patients? Family of patients? Business people? Retired Doctors and nurses? Philanthropists?

After a little over three months in a coma and two below-the-knee amputations, multiple skin graft operations, the four fingers of her right hand being removed, and numerous infections, she woke up to a very different world. I am sure there were many rough patches that she went through as she began to wrap her mind around what had happened and the fact that her life had forever changed. But with the help of the Shriners staff, she turned her tragedy into triumph and began her long road to recovery with a strength and grace that I cannot fully put into words. It was truly a miracle to see this young woman transform before all of our eyes. Her smile is, and always has been beautiful and infectious, but her drive to get better and walk again became her focus. Not only did she transform, but my sister's family, my Mom, and anyone who my Godchild had touched had a renewed sense of faith and hope. Essentially we were all transforming along with her in a spiritual way, and as she persevered and made small improvements all of us became better human beings. I am not sure if she actually realizes how much she helped all of us with our own re-awakening of what is most important in life. Watching her epic battle was something I had never experienced before and I hope I never will again. Her inner strength and drive was an inspiration for all of us. That is when the gift of the Orange Bracelet hit me. I have not taken it off since the accident and will not, ever. It signifies many things, just as the symbols in Masonry have many meanings, but for me it symbolizes that there are no bad days. If my Godchild can recover from such a horrific accident and still have her beautiful smile with a zest for life that is unwavering, then I believe my worst day is a good day.

Her recovery continued and after spending six months at the Shriners Hospital in Boston, she went home for Thanksgiving. She graduated with her class the following spring and walked under her own power to receive her diploma on her new legs (that were compliments of the Shriners Hospital in Springfield, Massachusetts) all to a standing ovation. If this wasn't enough to inspire anyone, she then decided that she wanted to do what she could to give back to the Shriners. She started to tell her story at different Shrine Centers throughout New England and Eastern Canada. Then she did radio commercials that were heard all over New England and finally a video on behalf of the Shriners to welcome new patients and help others with prosthetics. She is now in her third year as a Communications Major at Mississippi College and on the Dean's List. I don't think my Godchild truly knows how much she changed my life for the better, but as I would look at the Orange Bracelet on my right wrist I began to feel a strong desire to do more in my life and make a difference somehow, someday. What could I do? I did not need to go very far. After seeing what the Shriners Hospitals did for my Godchild and her family, from the medical care, the psychological care, the follow up, to the numerous prosthetics, and to witness the professionalism in which it was all administered I knew I wanted to become a Shriner. After becoming a Master Mason and joining the Scottish Rite, I became a Shriner in October of 2009 and my sister put on my fez for the first time during that Fall Ceremonial. Like my Grandfather, I recently became a Knight Templar as well. It is truly an honor to be a Shriner and I love driving the "Fred" go-kart in the only Flintstones Unit in the USA! So if you see me in a parade in Southwest Florida and you hear a YABADABADOO, please know that it comes from my heart and don't forget to notice the Orange Bracelet on my right wrist. My Godchild thinks it great and so do I. Thanks to all the Shriners throughout the world from my family, we are forever grateful to you. So Mote it Be.

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