

It's a leap of faith

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Paul Hudgik was in bed. His wife, Barbara, and their daughter, Emily, 19, were watching TV. Ordered home by his mom, David Hudgik, 16, made the short walk from downtown Keene with a couple of friends, one of whom was to sleep over.

They turned on the floodlight and took turns casually bouncing on the trampoline out back. It was about 9 p.m., Sept. 9, a Friday, the third day of school, temps in the mid 70s.

Then came the awful screams.

“Right away I knew something was terribly wrong,” says Paul Hudgik, speaking from his office last week, tears welling in his eyes. “Barb knew something had happened. His friends were freaking out.”

They rushed outside.

“Dad, I’ve done it, I’ve done it to myself. I can’t move.”

“He knew something was wrong,” Paul Hudgik says. “I said, ‘Don’t move. I want you to remain perfectly still.’ ”

“Dad, dad, I’m stuck in my tuck. Where are my legs?”

“Just stay still. Help is coming.”

“Dad, please call the people at church. Tell them to pray for me.”

David Hudgik was lying in the middle of the trampoline, his head compressed into his body, his neck broken. He was doing a simple forward roll — like he had done hundreds of times — and didn’t stick the landing, didn’t complete the roll. That, too, had happened hundreds of times, David easily bouncing back into an upright position.

Paul and Barb Hudgik knew injuries, even serious ones, were always a possibility. But not on the trampoline. They had strict rules — one at a time — and the kids always followed them. And, no, David was not allowed to jump with his skis on, although he once tried to fashion some cardboard-like skis that quickly fell apart as he jumped.

David is an avid freestyle skier, tops at Granite Gorge in Roxbury in his age division, the winner last year in events such as the Downtown Throwdown and Granite Gorge Rail Jam. He earned a free pass to Granite Gorge this season as the champion of his division.

“It’s his love and his passion,” Paul Hudgik says.

He’s got a gift for balance and the flair of a showman, as his doctors and nurses would soon find out. They liked him so much at UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester, Mass. — impressed by his attitude, wowed by his personality — that they voted him hero of the month.

No one in his family ever skied; they all do now, thanks to David. When he was 10, a neighbor introduced him to extreme snowboarding at Granite Gorge. An avid skateboarder, David made an agreement with his friend: “You teach me how to snowboard, I’ll teach you how to skateboard.”

His board broke when he was 11 and his parents said they would buy him a new one. Instead of a snowboard, David asked for freestyle skis. “They’re more versatile. I think I can do more with them,” David told his family.

He was a natural, and was soon teaching younger skiers freestyle tricks at Granite Gorge. Big air excited him, and he was one of the first to try the new Granite Gorge Bag Jump, introduced this summer.

You jump off a 42-foot-high platform and land in a 12-foot-high air bag. A picture of David at the top of his leap, a distant figure silhouetted against a deep blue sky, ran in The Sentinel in August.

So, yes, Paul Hudgik says, he was nervous about his son being injured.

“We had the normal concerns parents have,” he says. “But a trampoline accident? We weren’t expecting that. Skiing was more likely. Not this, though. Not your worst nightmare.”

David was first taken to Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene, where he was prepped for a helicopter flight to UMass Medical in Worcester. “Will I be able to look out the window?” he asked.

David loves planes, and last year took an introductory-lesson flight at Green River Aviation at Dillant-Hopkins Airport in North Swanzey. For his 16th birthday this year, in April, his parents promised him another flight. Paul joked “this counts as your flight,” one of the few brief humorous interludes on that dark night.

Though he never lost consciousness, David’s breathing became more shallow at UMass, his father squelching a rising panic, his mind racing with thoughts such as, that’s what a dying rabbit looks just before it expires.

Paul is crying now, remembering that night, pushing the words squeakily out of his throat.

“No parent should ever go through that. I was afraid we’d lose him.”

David underwent three hours of surgery to insert a metal rod and stabilize his bruised spinal cord. His C4 and C5 vertebrae were broken. It left him with limited movement in his left shoulder and no feeling on

his right side or below the waist.

Still, he wanted to sit in a wheelchair almost from the moment he woke up from surgery, wanted to watch helicopter takeoffs and landings, as the window in his room looked out to the pad.

Simply raising the bed caused his blood pressure to fall, yet his insistence to keep trying foreshadowed his resiliency during his two grueling weeks at UMass. When his lungs collapsed, which they did frequently, he'd calmly motion toward his chest with his left arm. His weight dropped from 153 pounds to 121.

“He’s a showman. He didn’t want his friends depressed,” Paul says. “His personality hasn’t changed.”

Which means David is not above a little morbid humor. Sometimes, in front of friends and family, he’d start shaking and then go limp. As his friends looked on in horror, he’d open his eyes, smile, and mouth, “Got ya.”

David was identified as a perfect candidate for the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, one of the top spinal cord rehabilitation hospitals for young people in the nation. Insurance covers the approximately three-month stay, but the family couldn’t afford the \$12,000 for a Lear jet to get him there.

Things started falling into place. The hero of the month award at UMass includes a fund that helps patients in need. That came to \$5,000. The Shepherd Center added another \$5,000. Individual donations, including one from David’s case manager whose son is a big-air skier and also has a trampoline, came in. Paul Hudgik wrote out a check to cover the rest.

David was flown to Atlanta on Sept. 23, Barb and Emily accompanying him, while Paul joined them a day later. Barb and Emily have been by his side in Atlanta ever since, and Paul left last weekend to join his family for Thanksgiving. They are staying in a local Ronald McDonald House.

Paul Hudgik is branch manager at Oce North America, a digital document management company with an office on Route 101 in Keene. Barb is music director at the Community Church in Frankestown. Their oldest son, Jason, 23, lives in Peterborough with his wife and daughter; Emily graduated from Keene High in the spring.

When David first entered UMass Medical, a doctor told the family the prognosis was “not good.” In the succeeding two months, he has regained most of the use of his left arm and some feeling is returning to his right arm.

“Things started coming back,” Paul Hudgik says. “But it’s very slow.”

Patients with similar injuries usually make the most progress in the first 18 months of recovery, so David’s rehabilitation program is intense. Today, he starts a day program that will run at least four

weeks. It comes with a “push pass” that allows him to travel off-site. He’s starting to regain the weight he lost and his father says “his appetite is huge.”

He also has a tutor because of the lost school time. “He’s not getting out of that,” his father says.

The Shepherd Center threw a facility-wide Thanksgiving gala Tuesday and the family will celebrate quietly alone on Thursday. Paul Hudgik says it will be a Thanksgiving like no other, a chance to reflect on what they have rather than what was lost.

The family still faces many challenges, the most pressing being housing. The apartment they live in on Washington Street is not handicapped accessible, and Paul says they are unsure where they will live. The date of David’s return home is also unknown.

Locally, several informal fundraisers have raised about \$16,000 for the family, including a bake sale at the Pumpkin Festival that raised \$3,000.

David Hudgik is already talking about skiing again, yet all they can do, for now, is take it one day at a time. “It’s going to be a different world for him,” his father says. “It’s different for all of us.”

Steve Gilbert is a columnist for The Sentinel.