

'They said there was no hope'

CHRIS HAGAN Statesman Journal

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On the night of Sept. 23, Vaughn Joseph Taylor whispered an urgent request into his granddaughter's ear.

"I just had a chance to talk to her for just a minute," Vaughn Joseph Taylor said. "I told her, I said, 'Hey Xandria, if you're in there, you have got to make a sign.'"

That day in September, Taylor and other members of the family had little reason to think 8-year-old Xandria heard the plea. She'd been unresponsive for nearly a month, lying in a bed at Doernbecher Children's Hospital since a ruptured brain tumor had sent her into a comatose state.

"The hospital was pushing us to disconnect," Taylor said, "because they said there was no hope. I hate to say it, but we were starting to plan a funeral."

Not this time. Not with this little girl.

"She's one of those remarkable ... kind of a miracle in medicine," said Tina French, a nurse who helped care for Xandria. "She definitely had some angels looking out for her."

Typical day at first

On Aug. 26, it was hard to imagine anything out of ordinary happening. Xandria and her mom, Annette Taylor, were shopping for school clothes at Target.

Her dad, Vaughn Patrick Taylor, and 13-year-old brother Ziryan were enjoying a father-son day. The two went to the Christian music festival RiverFest at Salem's Riverfront Park. Cell phone reception was bad in the area, and it wasn't until near the end of the concert that Ziryan was able to receive a call.

"I couldn't understand what the person was saying but it was a guy with a deep voice, and he said he was from Salem Hospital, and then I told (my dad) someone from Salem Hospital wanted to talk to (him), so I put (him) on," Ziryan said. "We had to walk out of there to hear because it was so loud."

What the man told Vaughn Patrick was that Xandria had a brain tumor that had hemorrhaged. She was being transferred from Salem Hospital to Doernbecher's Children's Hospital in Portland.

"Actually, we got there before she did," Ziryan said. "And we had to sit there waiting."

The tumor hemorrhage had damaged Xandria's brain stem, and she was in a comatose-like state, unable to answer her nurses, doctors or family members. So they waited, hoping to see some sign that she still was there.



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Xandria Taylor, a third-grader at Faye Wright Elementary School, works with Sharla Smith, a physical therapy assistant, at PT Northwest on Commercial Street SE on Thursday.

Xandria Taylor

To help the Taylor family, a fund has been established in Xandria's name at Key Bank. You also can get updates about Xandria's condition at www.caringbridge.org/visit/xandriataylor.

"She was virtually paralyzed," said French, who began caring for Xandria soon after her arrival. "She couldn't maintain her airway open."

In cases such as Xandria's, doctors look for patients to move in a way that shows they are communicating, French said. After nearly a month, Xandria had yet to do so.

"After a couple of weeks of caring for her, there wasn't any purposeful movements at all," French said. "There was a point where the staff was having meetings with the parents, explaining how grave the situation was."

No communication

The family considered letting Xandria go, "to a place where she could be the little girl she once was, where she could do all the things she loved, like dance, sing and play," wrote her mother Annette and Aunt Trinia Beaty in a letter sent to the Statesman Journal.

The family even picked out Xandria's casket.

"We sat in on the meetings they had with their doctors up there," Vaughn Joseph said. "There are four or five specialists up there, and they're telling us there's no hope."

"That was the worst days of our lives as a family," Vaughn Patrick said. "Life not only stopped for her, but it stopped for me. There are no feelings to express it. How can you hear those things? How could it be?"

On Sunday, Sept. 23, Vaughn Joseph gave a few words of encouragement to Xandria, not knowing whether she could hear them or not.

"You've got to let somebody know you're there," he told her.

Monday morning, a nurse came into Xandria's room to see if she could respond, asking her to wiggle her toes if she could hear.

And for the first time in a month, she did.

"Ziryana came running in with a video camera saying, 'Grandma, Grandpa, you've got to see this thing,'" grandmother Debra Taylor said.

That simple act opened up a line of communication between Xandria and her family.

"Wiggle her toes became yes and shaking her head became no," Vaughn Patrick said. "So that opened up the doorways to her being able to communicate, and that's when they decided that things were starting to change, and they did every day."

French had been off four days. Coming back to see Xandria communicating resonated with her: she had lost a daughter four years earlier to a brain tumor.

"Words can't describe it," French said. "There was a point there I'd leave and think about her and think there's no way she'll recover. To come back and see that was astounding."

Rapid recovery

"Ahh, I'm waiting for the rinse cycle!" Xandria shouted.

It's Dec. 20 and she is at her physical therapy appointment at PT Northwest in South Salem, decked out in pink toenail polish and a shirt reading "Ruling Heiress." She goes twice a week to build up strength in her arms and legs and reawaken the parts of her brain affected by the

hemorrhaging.

The line is from the new "Alvin and the Chipmunks" movie. She had seen the trailer and was waiting to go with her family that evening.

Xandria was transferred Oct. 10 from Doernbecher's to Legacy Emanuel Hospital in Portland, being released for home the day before Thanksgiving. At first she needed a walker, which she still uses, but she can now move unassisted and even jump and balance.

"With all the things we were told she was never going to be able to do -- and our main goal was to get her off that life support -- if she would have been in a wheelchair that would have been fine, but our goal was to get her so she could walk," Vaughn Joseph said. "She's surpassed that. Her memory's intact. Her reading ability's starting to progress."

Xandria rejoined her third-grade class at Faye Wright Elementary School on Dec. 3. While talking about her return to class, Xandria picks out one of her favorite parts of going back to school.

"Katlynnne," she cried out. Katlynnne Schmidt is Xandria's best friend, her father explained.

Xandria has even started to regain her old habits at home.

"She's even more bossy now," Ziryan said. "She'll be sitting on the couch and say, 'Do this for me, brother.' And I'll be sitting on the couch, and she'll jump on me and tease me."

While Xandria still needs to work to get back on the soccer field and back to the level of her classmates, it now seems possible. Her parents hope she'll reach a second-grade level by the end of her third-grade year.

And maybe most importantly her personality is where it once was.

"She was a really sweet girl before this happened," her grandfather said. "Really, really sweet. Very thoughtful, very considerate, and she's even sweeter now."

"She didn't lose that part of it," he said. "She's a wonderful granddaughter. She's all the time rubbing my head, calling me her little baby."

By all accounts her improvement, even since leaving the hospitals, has been amazingly quick.

"She gains in two days probably what in two to three weeks would be normal," said Sharla Smith, a PT Northwest physical therapy assistant. "It really is kind of miraculous, which is encouraging. She hasn't plateaued at any point yet."

Smith has been working with Xandria for about three weeks. Smith said her style with kids is more like playing, allowing Xandria to jump, bounce and walk like animals to strengthen herself.

"She just loves to giggle and have fun, she giggles all the time," Smith said. "And she loves to hug her dad. She always goes to the end of the line, and she always hugs her dad."

She's been impressed with how Xandria has dealt with having to work to get back to where she was. A natural left-hander, Xandria has learned to write right-handed since her left side is weaker now.

"She is strong-willed, but in a good way," Smith said. "She's not a victim, she doesn't think,

'poor me.' She doesn't make people baby her, and that's really big.

"She's going to do big stuff; I can see it. Even if maybe her walk doesn't improve to 100 percent, it won't ever stop her."

Watching from the physical therapy waiting room, Ziryan, Debra and Vaughn Joseph couldn't get over how far Xandria's come in so little time.

"We thought it was amazing when she could wiggle her toes. ... They said she wasn't going to do anything," Ziryan said. "She's basically standing up with no support now. Two weeks ago she would have never been able to do this."

Xandria has a surgery planned for Jan. 7 to remove the last of the tumor. Her family is anxious about the procedure but hopeful it will mark the last of her time in hospitals.

"We're hoping the surgery that's coming up won't keep her from going to school and continuing on where she's at," Vaughn Patrick said. "A lot of the anxiety of going back and finishing the job is we don't want to hear that again."

chagan@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6743