Katie's 14-year battle for hope

Head-on accident left Katie Pflueger confined to a wheelchair and unable to communicate

By MICHELLE HATFIELD
Staff Writer

Fourteen years. Fourteen years of fighting, of challenging doctors, of researching, of crying. Fourteen years of praying to have your daughter back.

For 14 years, Katie Pflueger has been confined to a wheelchair, unable to communicate because of a severe head trauma she suffered at the age of 2.

Since her injury, Katie's parents have jumped on planes, chasing any possible treatment or therapy at prestigious institutions across America. Chasing these therapies costs money, most of which is raised by donations and at benefit barbecues like one at Bolado Park on July 29.

In April 1987, Tena Pflueger was driving her Chevy Malibu along a two-lane junction in Lodi. Within seconds, she found herself in a head-on collision that left her with a limp and Katie with a blunt head trauma from when her head hit the driver's seat upon impact. Katie was in a coma for six days, Tena said. The doctors gave no hope for a recovery by the 2-year-old.

"They (Katie's doctors) told me 'Your daughter will be in a vegetative state for the rest of her life,'" Tena said. "They told us to get on with our lives. They told us she'd never walk, talk or feed herself. She feeds herself. She listens to country music."

For eight years, the Pfluegers listened to the conventional doctors and did everything "the school way," Tena said.

"During these years, nothing happened," she said.

"They didn't strive to get her well. Our goal is to get her well."

Around 1996, Tena and Tim discovered the book, "What to Do About Your Brain-Injured Child" by Glen Doman, founder of the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Wyndmoor, Penn.

The book discusses many new ways to treat brain injuries in children. One alternative pattern, which regresses the relationship between sensory input and motor output to help injured children remember how to do such things as crawling.

With the aid of five to six volunteers, Katie underwent patterning from 1996 to the present. Tena said Katie hasn't done patterning for a few months because it takes a number of people to hold her limbs and go through the motions of crawling.

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ing—volunteers that Tena doesn't have right now. When Tena is using patting on Katie, she and the volunteers move Katie's limbs for five minutes nine times a day.

"Pattening is inputting to the brain all the senses," Tena said. "It's teaching her how to crawl all over again."

In 1998, the Pfluegers took Katie to the Chico Hyperbaric Center where she underwent Hyperbaric oxygen therapy. According to the center's Web site, "Hyperbaric oxygen therapy is a medical treatment that uses the administration of 100 percent oxygen at a controlled pressure (greater than sea level) for a prescribed amount of time (usually 60 to 90 minutes)."

The therapy has a positive effect on peripheral blood vessels and causes the formation of new capillaries which effectively increase blood flow to the body's extremities, according to the Web site. HBO therapy is also used for the treatment of many conditions including burns, diabetic ulcers and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Tena and Katie sit in a monoplace chamber for 60 to 90 minutes twice a day, Tena said. While in there, Tena stretches Katie's muscles, reads to her and they both listen to music, Tena said.

Money people have donated paid for 140 "dives," 80 of which the Pfluegers have used. Tena said she plans to take Katie back to the center next year to finish the other 60.

While in Chico, Tena discovered another form of treatment that has been a big help in Katie's progression. Tena found CranioSacral Therapy when she saw a chiropractor about her injured back. After working on Tena's back, Dr. Russ Kalen, looked at Katie and began gently pushing on some of her cranial bones. On the fourth or fifth visit, Kalen adjusted the sphenoid bone, allowing Katie to see better than she has since the accident, Tena said.

The current goal is to raise money to go to Florida for a two-week CranioSacral Therapy session with Dr. John E. Upledger, founder of the Upledger Institute.

"The saddest thing is when we meet another parent who's given up on their child," Tena said.

Tena remembers the instant she decided to fight until Katie was back to the way she was before the accident.

After Katie came home in August 1987, she was on Tena's lap. Katie was playing with Katie when the 2-year-old hit her thumb. Tena said "Don't bite me." Katie did it again, and Tena repeated "Don't bite me." Katie then opened her mouth to bite Tena again, but peered up at her mother, waiting for her to say "Don't bite me."

Katie then let out a little laugh.

"I promised her right then and there that I'd always fight for her," Tena said. "I knew she was inside there."

Today, Katie attends school at Orestimba High School in Newman, where the Pfluegers live, and Tena said she sees college in Katie's future.

Even though Katie has a brain injury, she still has likes and dislikes. Tena said Katie loves listening to country music and loves her dad.

Because the police were unable to find a cause for the medical bills. The Pflueger receive government aid to mainly help pay for Katie's wheelchair.

"We're trying to get her the wheelchair," Tena said. "We've noticed that she goes out the most when she's in the wheelchair."

Katie's Benefit Barbecue will be held July 29 at Boki Park from 11 a.m. to dusk. The Mojo Navigators will entertain guests who can purchase surf vendor booths, participate in watermelon-eating and lip-syncing contests and be amused by clowns. Food will be available for purchase and several saviors are donating material for the installation of a pond valued at around $8,000 for the winner of a raffle.

Tickets are $10 each or three for $25 and will be available at Johnny's Bar a Grill and Design Line Plus. Tickets will also be available the day of the barbecue.

Tena said volunteers are still needed. Anyone interested can call Pfluegers at (831) 902-861 (209) 862-3490, or attend meeting Sunday at 2 p.m. 50 Daffodil Dr., Hollister.

On the net: