

Some people are dying to find life again

Few stories could go from so bad to so good to so hard to understand. It's kind of like beating death and then dying to find life again.

More than three months ago, I wrote about one of my best college friends who nearly lost his life serving the public. Cliff Hembree, a Sheriff's deputy in Tuscaloosa, responded to an early morning call on Nov. 29, 2003, and was struck by a car while checking the registration on a gun.

He was rushed into brain surgery just hours later, given little chance at normalcy and even less chance of survival.

Nearly a month later, at 4:30 a.m. on Christmas Day, Cliff came out of his coma, hugged angelic wife Lisa, and began a life few of us can understand.

Over the past few months, friends and strangers have called to ask how my friend is doing. The reality is, I can't honestly answer the questions. I can't explain — nor can I understand — the thoughts of a person whose bright future turns dark in an instant. I wouldn't dare pretend to know how it feels when you lose your independence.

Almost four months ago, the friends and relatives who hovered in the waiting room of DCH in Tuscaloosa had one hope for Cliff. When his brain pressure spiked, when his blood pressure dropped, when the bleeding wouldn't stop, our only hope and prayer was that Cliff would survive. It's amazing how selfish we become when one prayer is

answered.

Today, Cliff tackles the mystery of life with his eyes wide shut.

Miraculously, his memory (except for the accident) remains intact. His words are as measured as they always were. And he can still taste the crawfish he once cooked every St. Patrick's Day.

For all that could have been lost on that horrid November morning, Cliff's only long-lasting sacrifice is his sight.

Most of us aren't the type to gloat on past achievements. With a premium on immediacy, we want more before we appreciate what we have. Cliff's no different from the rest of us.

Because he doesn't remember the accident, or the life-saving surgery, or the coma, there's a good chance Cliff may never understand the miracle of his life. Instead, Cliff only remembers how things were when he patrolled the streets of Tuscaloosa County and the interstates of Louisiana as a State Trooper. He remembers the last Alabama football game he saw with his own eyes — a loss to Auburn on Nov. 22, which is also Cliff's birthday, which is also the day JFK was assassinated (as Cliff always reminded me).

He remembers what it looked like

to load weights on the bar of a bench press. He remembers the splash of the water when he boiled the crawfish.

Last week, I talked to Cliff and heard the frustration Lisa faces every day. I heard the angst of a man who wanted to shatter the walls around him. I sensed that if Cliff's optic nerves could work for just one more day, he'd study the lining of the leaves and the pebbles in the asphalt.

Worse than anything, I felt the regrettable reality that Cliff's friends are scattered all over the country. We work in jobs that dictate evening hours, chasing misguided priorities that place profession above true dedication. We become creatures of a fast-paced world while Cliff becomes a creature in the dark.

As I write, Cliff and Lisa are preparing to travel to Baton Rouge, La., where Cliff's mother faces a battle tougher than the one her son survived. The lady who claimed a permanent seat at DCH during Cliff's hospitalization now lies on a hospital bed trying to beat the most ravenous form of cancer.

I can't honestly tell you how my friend Cliff is doing these days.

Though he lived when most thought he couldn't, Cliff needs his friends now more than ever. He and Lisa both need us to help shatter the new walls around them.

Most of us don't appreciate the value of friendships. We should, because sometimes, we're the only people who can help a friend dying to find life again.



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