

# Community rallies together for Jimmy and Mya



Jimmy Dolan (left) and Mya Diacono suffered traumatic brain injuries just a month apart due to automobile accidents. It is their stories that have brought the Louisburg community closer together.

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Jimmy Dolan and Mya Diacono live in the same community but were worlds apart from each other.

Jimmy, a junior at Louisburg High School, loves to wrestle, hang out with friends and live the life of a teenager.

It was a far cry from 9-year-old Mya who loves soccer, horses and spending time with her fourth-grade friends at Broadmoor Elementary. In a town of less than 5,000 people, the two had never met.

Two tragic accidents changed all of that.

On Jan. 12, Jimmy lost control of his vehicle while driving to school and suffered a major brain injury. Just 42 days later, Mya was involved in an automobile accident just outside the Louisburg city limits that left her with the same severe brain trauma.

Both were rushed to hospitals with life-threatening

conditions. Their lives, and the lives of their families, were turned upside down in an instant.

The two families were told the same thing – no brain injury is the same. There was no telling when they would wake up, breathe on their own or what their lives would be like.

The two kids who had never met each other were laying in beds at Children's Mercy Hospital 10 rooms apart – their families holding out hope that one day they would walk out of the hospital.

So, this is the story of Jimmy and Mya – a story of a tragic meeting, a long road to recovery and a community that came together to help two families when they needed it the most.

### **Jimmy's accident**

It was a Monday morning and Maureen Dolan had already started her work day at Vintage Park. The roads were slick that morning and she was a little concerned about her son Jimmy.

Maureen wanted to catch him before he left for school so she tried to call him. There was no answer.

"I just wanted to tell him to be careful," she said.

It was shortly after, a co-worker came in and told Maureen about an accident on old Metcalf Road. She swung her head toward the clock with a brief sense of relief.

Maureen knew Jimmy should have already been at school and that it couldn't have been him. It had to be someone else.

Then her phone rang – Jimmy was hurt.

Jimmy lost control of his vehicle near the intersection of 295<sup>th</sup> and Metcalf and slid off the road. The driver's side

collided with a tree and left him unconscious and fighting for his life.

Workers from the Panhandle Eastern Pipe Line Co. heard the accident and were the first on the scene. Jimmy's truck had caught on fire and workers helped put it out while attending to Jimmy.

Moments later, USD 416 superintendent Dr. Brian Biermann was on his way to drop off his kids at school when he came upon the accident. At that time only a fire truck and the workers from the gas plant were on the scene.

"They weren't letting people through and I heard more sirens coming," Dr. Biermann said. "I could see a truck down in the little ravine but I didn't know who it was, but I did know it was about the time kids are going to school.

"I got out of the car and told my boys to stay put. As I walked down I could hear the people saying 'Stay with us, stay with us.' I knew it wasn't good."

Still not knowing who the victim was, Dr. Biermann asked the sheriff officers on the scene to run the plate hoping it wasn't one of his students. It was Jimmy Dolan.

Maureen arrived at the scene a few minutes later after a call from Dr. Biermann in time to see her son on a stretcher preparing to be Life Flighted.

"I was told when I got there that they didn't think he was going to make it," she reflected.

Jimmy was loaded onto the helicopter and transported to Research Medical Center in Kansas City, Mo., where his fight for survival began.

## **Jimmy the Fighter**

Louisburg High School's Bobby Bovaird had seen Jimmy's fight and determination up close on the wrestling mat and in life.

Just two days earlier, Bovaird, the Wildcat coach, had just watched Jimmy put his best wrestling performance on display at the Louisburg Invitational. He finished fourth at 182 pounds despite losing a tough overtime match.

"He came off the mat, frustrated and angry, and he threw his headgear for the first time I'd ever seen him do that," Bovaird said. "He was upset, and I knew that on that following Monday, we'd have a lot to work on. He wanted to work on it – he wanted to improve. He was driven and perhaps the most driven kid on the team."

Jimmy was willing to do whatever it took to get better at the sport he loved. He didn't have a lot of money to participate in offseason camps or trips with the Wildcat team.

That didn't stop him. He picked up odd jobs here and there, including mowing his coach's lawn to help pay for those camps, including a team trip to Nebraska this past summer.

But when LHS principal Dave Tappan came into Bovaird's room that Jan. 12 morning to tell him the news of Jimmy's accident, Bovaird's heart sank.



**Jimmy Dolan had one of his best wrestling performances just two days before his accident.**

“The news floored me,” he said. “I couldn’t believe it, even after I heard Life Flight. I can’t describe the feeling, hearing the sound of a helicopter flying overhead, seeing it out the window as it raced through the air, knowing that it was carrying someone you knew.”

Jimmy arrived at Research and doctors immediately began treating him for his physical injuries and he was put on a ventilator. After several tests, it was found that he suffered from a brain shear injury, or more specifically, a diffuse axonal injury.

“The trauma doctor that first saw him said that he had just suffered a severe concussion, he wouldn’t be able to wrestle for the rest of the year but that he would be fine,” Maureen said.

“Then when we got into ICU, the neurologist came in and told us something different after running some tests said there was a shear injury on the brain. His injury was basically the all-over brain injury, it wasn’t just on the frontal lobe. His

injury went all the way down to his brain stem.”

Doctors told Maureen that Jimmy’s outlook wasn’t good.

“When he first got there, the doctors weren’t sure if he was going to pull through or not,” Maureen said. “His brain started to swell and the fluid starting building up. They said if he does pull through they didn’t know if he would be able to walk or talk again.

“At first they told us that we should expect to be in ICU for six months because his coma could last that long. I told them, ‘I don’t think so. You don’t know Jimmy Dolan. He is not going to lay around for six months.’”

And he didn’t.

### **Road to Recovery**

For almost a month, Jimmy was in a coma, and there wasn’t much progress early on. On Jan. 30, he was moved from Research to Children’s Mercy Hospital for continued treatment.

It was a lot of waiting and praying for Maureen and the rest of Jimmy’s friends and family – including his wrestling family. In the days following the accident, the waiting room was filled with wrestling parents, teammates and coaches to provide support.

Bovaird made several trips to the hospital looking for signs that Jimmy was going to be OK. He, along with Maureen and Jimmy’s friends, would sit as his side and talk to him as he rested on the ventilator.

One day, he got the sign he was looking for – a pretty noticeable one.

“His buddies would tease him about giving him a rainbow-

colored mohawk, and we thought there was some response from him,” Bovaird said. “Maybe it was wishful thinking, or maybe it was there. I joined in with the teasing, talking about his favorite song being something by Taylor Swift. At that point, I was pretty sure I saw the middle finger of his right hand come up.

“Sure enough, his arm raised slightly and the finger extended. If there ever was a time that I would give a kid a free pass on something like that, this was it. Besides, it was a sign I think we all needed, me especially. Jimmy was there. His personality was still there and he was fighting to get back out.”



**Jimmy currently gets rehab several days a week at Children's Mercy Hospital**

As the days wore on, Jimmy continued to make progress. Then on Feb. 11, almost a month after his accident, Jimmy officially awoke from his coma and began to talk.

It was then his recovery started to speed up. Jimmy underwent therapy and his road to recovery was well on its way. He would take his first steps with a walker and eventually use it without the therapist's help.

"He is definitely making steady progress," Maureen said. "I asked him the next day after he woke up what his name was and where he was at and he told me. He just started improving by leaps and bounds.

"The brain reroutes itself and that is why he is able to start talking and walking again. The doctors say it could take time, even years for it get better, but no one really knows how long."

It is a journey Jimmy and Maureen are ready for, thanks in part to the Louisburg community.

### **Pin the Problem Jimmy**

The Dolans experienced many ups and downs through the near month of uncertainty with Jimmy's condition.

However, the one constant was the community of Louisburg – more specifically – the Wildcat wrestling family. From the day Jimmy was admitted to the hospital, Louisburg took over the Research waiting room on a daily basis.

Parents and students alike came by to support Maureen in her time of need, and Jimmy's friends made daily trips to visit their ailing comrade.

"It meant a lot to me," Jimmy said. "It felt really good to see them and have them come visit me. "

Jimmy was in the hospital 67 days between Research and Children's Mercy and during that time parents came to relieve Maureen and offered to stay by Jimmy's side so she could spend



some time with her second-grade daughter Jenny.

It certainly didn't stop there.



**One of Jimmy's best friends Joseph Hannah was one of several Louisburg residents to make countless trips to visit Jimmy**

"I couldn't tell you how many people came up to see Jimmy because there was just so many," Maureen said. "It was amazing. They brought gift cards, they brought support, they brought prayer...they brought so much and it was so wonderful.

"The wrestling family is very tight. They brought lunch and dinner every day for a long time. Louisburg is definitely the best place to live."

Joseph Hannah, one of Jimmy's best friends, and his parents Mark and Courtney Hannah, ordered purple rubber bracelets with

'Pin the Problem' written on them. Bovaird created a Facebook page to update everyone on his condition and the team wore Pin the Problem stickers on their head gear toward the end of the season.

The Louisburg Wrestling Club ordered Pin the Problem t-shirts and sold them during the regional tournament in February to raise money for the Dolans. The Louisburg American Legion held a 50/50 raffle to benefit, in which the winner donated most of her winnings back to Jimmy.

Louisburg Ford and LHS Cat-Backers donated the proceeds from their 3-point shot contest, and shortly after the accident, the administration and faculty collected money for the Dolans.

Even the employees at Maureen's work, Vintage Park, donated their PTO time so that she is able to stay with her family. Dr. Biermann also ordered the bus pick up her daughter Jenny for school, even though she was staying near Drexel, Mo., as buses are not supposed to cross state lines to pick up students.

All the support has meant the world to the Dolans as Jimmy has been able to focus on rehabbing and trying to get back to that normal life he had before that morning in January.

To this day, Jimmy doesn't remember what happened that fateful day.

"It was just shocking, to hear," Jimmy said. 'It's scary just trying to think about it and I am glad that I don't remember it.

"I look at life like it's a big deal now. I am just trying to take things step by step and that is the most important thing right now."

Jimmy currently has therapy four days a week at Children's Mercy and is staying at the Ronald McDonald house until he is

able to move on to outpatient rehabilitation closer to home.

“I have been making a lot of progress, especially with walking,” Jimmy said. “It has been going really good. I even took 900 steps without the walker the other day.”

He is also hitting the books as the school has been sending him work to do in hopes he can stay on course to graduate next year.

“We met with them to see what we can do to make sure Jimmy still graduates on time,” Dr. Biermann said. “That is what Jimmy wants, that is what we want and his mom definitely wants that. I fully expect him to walk across that stage without his walker and get his diploma. He is doing some work up there with some education things and the plan is to transition him back a couple Fridays here later this month or early May.

“To where I saw Jimmy from the truck, from his stay at Research to now has just been unbelievable. God is good.”

On Mar. 24, Jimmy reunited with his wrestling family during the team’s banquet. For the first time since the accident, he walked through the halls of Louisburg High School.

“It was difficult to keep my composure when I saw Jimmy walking down the hallway when he came to the banquet,” Bovaird said. “To hear him talking was one thing, but to see him walking – using only the walker for assistance – here in his own school was something that was just amazing to see.”

Even though doctors gave Jimmy little hope in the beginning, he overcame the odds. Now Jimmy is the one giving hope – hope to a family that is in desperate need of it.

### **Mya’s tragic day**

The afternoon of Feb. 24 was just like many others. Kids rushed out of Broadmoor Elementary as another day of school was done and little Mya Diacono caught a ride with family friend Jill Crane and her two daughters.

As the Cranes ventured on Kansas Highway 68 just outside the Louisburg city limits, Jill slowed to make the turn into Mya's home. Tragedy struck as a semi failed to slow down and hit her vehicle from behind.

Emergency vehicles rushed to the scene and Jill and her two daughters were taken to Miami County Medical Center. Unfortunately, Mya's injuries were more serious.

Mya suffered severe head trauma and had to be Life Flighted to Children's Mercy. The injuries left her in a coma and she had to be put on a ventilator.

Doctors informed Mya's parents, Spencer and Amber Gardner, that there is no way to know when she would wake up and what her life would be like if she did.



**Mya Diacono**

The Gardners had a feeling of hopelessness and the waiting was getting tiresome like it would for any parent in that situation. However, just 10 rooms away from Mya's, laid a little bit of hope.

First Baptist Church pastor Dan Rhodes came by Children's Mercy, recognized Spencer and asked about Mya. Then he told Spencer, "I have someone for you to meet."

Rhodes took the Gardners to see Jimmy Dolan. By that time, Jimmy was on his way to recovery. He was talking and started to regain some movement.

Although it was a bit of shock to both Amber and Spencer, hope started to come back.

"When I first saw him they were lifting him up out of bed and

putting him in his wheelchair because he told them he had to go to the bathroom and they were all excited,” Spencer said. “That is when it hit me like a ton of bricks – this is going to be our future.

“But if you are going to compare our 9-year-old daughter to something, why not compare her to the strength of a wrestler. Jimmy told people when he woke up that he was going to walk again and he has done really well. It is good for us to see someone succeeding that has been through this and come out the other side.”

Amber and Spencer continued to monitor Jimmy’s progress and became friends with Maureen. The three stayed at the Ronald McDonald House when they weren’t by their child’s side.

“Jimmy’s mom is so strong and it is nice to have someone there come by and say that (Mya) is doing great and she is going down the right path and that it is only going to get better,” Spencer said.

### **Support for Mya**

Four years ago, Mya was a kindergartner in Overland Park but Amber and Spencer had talked about moving to a smaller town to raise their children.

Spencer, who is a Louisburg High School graduate, grew up in Louisburg and wanted to bring his children up in the same type of environment.

“It was a great community for me to grow up in,” he said. “I went to a school where I knew everyone in my class. I got to wrestle and play golf and I wasn’t good at either of them. I couldn’t have asked for a better place to grow up.

“I left for a while and I always had this idea that I wanted my kids to grow up in the same small town. I didn’t expect to

come back and have the same closeness I had when I was a kid. The sense of community is still very much alive and well here.”

Amber, on the other hand, wasn't quite as sure. She didn't want Mya to have to start over again and make new friends.

As it turned out, that really wasn't a problem for Mya.

“I worried that it was a small town and that she might not be accepted and I had all these what ifs,” Amber said. “But she has come here and made so many friends. I wouldn't change our decision for anything because it has been great for Mya and our family.”

Amber and Spencer found out just how good the town was at one of the most disheartening times of their life. As they were struggling to cope with Mya's condition, Amber got a visit from a complete stranger – Jenny Diederich.

She approached Amber about doing a fundraiser for Mya and the gesture caught her a little off-guard.



me was a big part of the Kids Helping Kids fundraiser to help Mya family

“(Jenny) didn’t even know us and said I am going to do this for you guys,” “I mean, who does this? We were just blown away with what she did.”

Diederich put on the Kids Helping Kids fundraiser at Louisburg High School that featured a bubble soccer game and a custom cake auction. Several community members donated cakes and Bubble Soccer Kansas brought inflatables as faculty and staff from Broadmoor Elementary took on each other.

Steve Hamilton with Chris Cakes fed the crowd while LHS band director John Cisetti brought his LHS Jazz Band to play at the event. The fundraiser was to help benefit not only Mya, but the Crane family as well.



As Amber arrived at the high school, she couldn't believe her eyes.

"I expected maybe 50 people and I was grateful for that," Amber said "When we pulled up to park, just seeing all the cars and then walking in the door and seeing a line of people...I just started to cry. There are good people in this world and I am just overwhelmed with all the support."

It got even more emotional later in the evening when Jill Crane, one of Amber's best friends, donated her half of the money to Mya. However, that isn't a gift Amber is going to accept just yet.

"Jill is my good friend and her daughter is Mya's best friend," Amber said. "She doesn't feel worthy because her daughters weren't injured critically. It is hard on everyone though. We are still arguing about that. Money is not going to change it. They still had injuries too."

The night was something the Gardner's needed. They saw everyone who cared for Mya and it lifted their spirits, even if it was for a few hours.

### **Jimmy and Mya**

As the days wore on, Jimmy made good on his promise to his family and he learned to walk with the assistance of a walker.

Jimmy's recovery was moving along at a rapid rate, but Mya's wasn't moving along quite as fast. There was signs of progress, however.

Mya's physical injuries have healed and she is no longer on the ventilator – a big obstacle for her recovery.

“I work for the railroad, so I was gone for a little bit, but the improvements she has made have been more dramatic for me because I wasn’t there every day,” Spencer said. “We have our milestones and our big thing was we wanted to breathe on her own and she is passed that. We are in the rehab stages now and she is using a lot more muscles than she was before.”

Mya even gave her mom a glimpse or her old self.



**Mya and her mom Amber Gardner**

“She smiled for the first time late one night,” Amber said. “I didn’t realize she could hear me because I was making jokes about our family and a little smile came out and you could hear a little chuckle. I was like ‘Did anyone just see that?’”

“Her body is healed and now we are just focusing on the brain. She went from no head control to some head control and that is one of our milestones. We know she has a long way to go. She is not eating on her own, she isn’t walking but she is on full assist. From the beginning to right now we feel like we have seen a lot of progress.”

The Gardners also saw progress wandering the halls of Children’s Mercy as Jimmy would make visits to Mya’s room, checking in on her.

“He comes by to see Mya every so often and they have even gone to therapy together,” Amber said. “He even made a card for her one time and dropped it by. It was really neat to see that.”

Jimmy was eventually released from Children’s Mercy and moved into the Ronald McDonald House with his mom, while still doing therapy. It is there Jimmy still stays in touch with the Gardners.

“You form a connection,” Amber said. “I sat with him with our boys a few days ago and he has improved so much. When I first saw him he wasn’t eating on his own and now he is eating fried chicken. That is amazing.”

Every time the Gardners look at Jimmy they see a hope – a hope that one day Mya will be the one roaming the hospital hallways, eating on her own and talking with them again.

They are patiently waiting for their precious “Baby Cakes” to wake up.