

ANDY SHEPHERD

Earns His Badge of Courage

BY JOEY KUBESCH

On a sleepy, hot summer day on a farm near Silver Lake, Ind., Andy Shepherd and two of his buddies pass the time brushing Andy's 4-H heifer. Soon a challenge is issued by Andy: "let's see how many flies we can catch with our hands!" In just a few minutes, Andy had 13 flies; his two pals none.

This exceptional reflex ability was proven last March, when an ordinary trip in the family car turned into an extraordinary rescue effort.

A sixth grade student at Silver Lake Elementary School, Andy had lost some school time due to a case of strep throat. On March 1 his mother took him to the doctor's office and to the drugstore for a prescription

Andy slumped under his seat belt in the back seat of their car, dozing as a sick boy might. Suddenly, a loud noise shattered his rest. The windshield of the family car flew all over the car's interior. The screams of his five-year-old sister, Ashley, urged Andy into action. Andy's mom, Andrea Shepherd, had been hit in the face with a 10-pound piece of steel. It had fallen off the bed of a passing semi truck. Flinging off his seatbelt, Andy jumped into the front seat and dove for the car's brake. Nothing happened.

"She shoved her foot down on the accelerator when she passed out," Andy explains. "There was glass and blood



Andy Shepherd saved his mother and sister after their car was hit by a 10-pound piece of metal falling off a truck (Photo reprint permission of The Journal Gazette, Fort Wayne, Ind.)

everywhere. My sister kept screaming."

Andy didn't buckle under the pressure. Somehow this 12-year-old kept his composure. He pulled his mom's foot from the accelerator, braked the car to the roadside, and shifted it into park.

"I started honking the horn like crazy, and the car behind us stopped," Andy recalls. "When I saw it in the mirror I jumped out, waving my arms, and told the man what had happened. He passed his cellular phone to another

woman motorist, and she called 911."

The man started helping Andy's mom. Soon, the ambulance arrived and she was taken to Kosciusko County Hospital. Later she was moved to Parkview Memorial Hospital in Fort Wayne. Doctors treated her for multiple cuts and broken facial bones. She would recover, however, thanks to Andy's fast thinking and heroic deed.

Later, Andrea would explain how she and her two kids had watched the

television program, **Rescue-911**, as part of a weekly ritual ... "because you can never tell when something is going to happen," she adds.

Andy had never driven a car before, but has ample experience operating farm machinery and trucks on his neighbor's farm. Those neighbors are Angus breeders Dr. Richard and Sharon Sommers and their two daughters, Jill and Janelle. Andy keeps his cattle and pigs at the Sommers and often chores for them. Hay wagons

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are ferried to and from the hay field, and trucks and tractors moved around the Sommers Farm by this enthusiastic young man with only 81 pounds on his wiry frame. Farm experience has taught him responsibility and that keeping calm and cool can soothe the nervous or agitated livestock.

Andy's life hasn't been easy, and as a result, he possesses maturity and sense of responsibility beyond his 12 years. Andrea is really his stepmother. His natural mother died before he was two years old of a severe case of chicken pox. His father met and married Andrea and they had Ashley. Just when Andy felt he had a real family again, his father unexpectedly died. He had been shoveling a path for their ducks to get back to the chicken house to escape the deep snow and zero temperatures. Andy discovered him by the pond.

So it is that Andrea and the Sommers have become monumental figures in Andy's life. "She's my MOM," declares Andy in a quiet but firm voice when a visitor inquires about his stepmother.

Since early childhood, Andy can't remember not going to church and worshipping with the Sommers Family. As Doc Sommers explains it, "we never had a son; Andy is about as close as we could come."

Others have recognized this exceptional young man. Kosciusko County, Ind., DARE officer, Bret Richardson, presented Andy with a DARE bear for using good judgment and being a hero. Andy's teacher, Scott Johnston, praises Andy's common sense and physical coordination.

"He's probably superior to boys his age, and that's what helped with his quick reaction time," Johnston says. "He



Andy Shepherd displays special pride in his Angus heifer and his family.

thinks anyone else would have done the same thing, if it had been their mom. I told him, "Andy a lot of adults would have panicked, not knowing what to do."

The Kosciusko County sheriff, Al Rovenstine, presented Andy with a commendation plaque. It is awarded only to those citizens who do something extraordinary. School principal Gene England presented another plaque. It designated Andy 'Hero of the Year.'

The Shepherds have started keeping a scrapbook of newspaper clippings. There has also been much publicity in the Silver Lake and surrounding areas newspapers about the accident and Andy's heroics. National exposure could follow, if a research team from the *Rescue-911* television show decides it has enough material for a segment about the Shepherd Family. The driver of the blue cab, flat-bed truck that lost the 10-pound piece of metal has not been found. The 911 TV program people are interviewing witnesses to the accident to search for clues and gather material.

Andrea still ponders the what-ifs. "I think there was something very special and lucky about the trip home from the doctor's office that day," she says. "I drive that same road every Monday and Wednesday, almost always by myself. I was so lucky to have Andy along on that trip. He is an angel. He acts like he doesn't pay attention, but he does. He's a wonderful, caring kid. He's just like his dad."

Has this family changed since the accident? Andy believes they're much closer now. "We talk more and spend more time together," he says.

Andrea describes it as a concern for each other. "When I leave for work the kids follow me down the driveway, kissing me goodbye and telling me to be careful," she says.

Andrea's mother, Bernardina Arriaga, who is from San Luis Potosi, Mexico, moved to Indiana to live and help with her daughter's rehabilitation.

"Before the accident, the kids never would bother to try any of the words their grandmother would try to teach them," Andrea says. "Now they're learning Spanish. I hear Andy teaching his grandmother

English, too..."Vaca, mi Abuela means COW!"

Living beyond what some might consider disfiguring facial scars was a challenge for Andrea early on. My mother wouldn't let me wear the giant-size bandages I bought to cover the scars on my left cheek," Andrea says.

"They look worse than the scars," Bernardma would say. "It doesn't show as much as you think."

Andrea has toughed it out through hours of surgery and weeks with her jaws wired shut. Plastic surgery will be done after oral surgeons have mended severed teeth and grafted bone into open spaces.

The Sommers Family, fellow Angus breeders, friends and neighbors have united to start "The A Fund" at the Claypool Methodist Church in Silver Lake. This fund was established to help the Shepherd Family cover Andrea's medical bills as a result of the accident. Although more than \$5,000 in donations have been made, more funds are needed.

A classic Chevy Nova sits in the driveway of the Shepherd home, awaiting the day when Andy can drive his father's prized possession. The goal that most interests Andy, however, is not to drive that car but to help his mom.

"If I won the lottery, the thing I would do first with the money would be to get my mom's scars fixed," Andy says.

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