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BY
HEATHER
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TRIAL *by* FIRE



This past summer started as usual. We were busy fixing fences, irrigating, haying and riding range. My husband, Lynn, and I both grew up on ranches here in Idaho's Lemhi Valley; this is our way of life. We enjoy the cattle and have always felt a ranch was a good place to raise children.

Our children share our love of ranching. Our daughter, Andrea, and her husband, Jim, have a home here. Jim works as a river and hunting guide and helps with calving. Andrea helps us year-round. Our son, Michael, his wife, Carolyn, and their two children now lease the ranch next to ours and are building a nice herd of cattle.

It's a team effort. All strive to make it work, doing extra things to make ends meet. We've managed to make a living, and we are glad our children wanted to share this life.

But, in the blink of an eye, our lives changed forever.

It was July 5. Jim was getting ready for a river trip. He and the other guides were at their base camp, ready for an early start the next morning.

Andrea and their 2½-year-old daughter, Emily (“Em”), were visiting friends who were putting on a fireworks display. The last rocket malfunctioned and flew over to the hillside behind the house. It started a fire in dry sagebrush. The men rushed out to fight the fire. Andrea called the fire department.

She called to tell us and said she would stay there with Em until the fire department arrived. One of the guys had started a little John Deere crawler tractor to plow a firebreak. Due to the dry conditions, however, the fire was soon out of control.

Just before midnight we got a call from one of the firefighters. He told us he was

bringing Em to town and that Andrea was being brought in by ambulance. Lynn and I quickly drove 12 miles to the hospital, where doctors and nurses were working on Andrea and Mark Hansen in the emergency room, getting them stabilized and ready to be flown to the Intermountain Burn Center at Salt Lake City, Utah, 380 miles away.

Mark was coherent, but Andrea was unconscious and receiving oxygen. I caught a glimpse of her, lying in the emergency room with three people working on her. Her body was covered with a sheet, but her bare legs were in spasms, the skin peeling in ragged tatters. It's an image I will carry in my mind forever. For 37 days, I would not see her.

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Above: In the blink of an eye, life as they knew it changed forever for Heather Smith Thomas and her family. Daughter Andrea's (right) road to recovery after being caught on a blazing mountainside has begun, but it will be some time before she can rejoin her sister-in-law, Carolyn (left), and nephew, Nick (center), in moving cows.

Reconstructing events

Some of the emergency medical technicians (EMTs), firefighters and, later, Andrea helped us piece together what happened.

Layne Scholkowsky, a volunteer firefighter, heard the scanner report as he was driving with his 12-year-old daughter, Jo. He realized where the fire was and who was involved. Jo wanted to go with her dad, so he headed to the fire immediately.

After Andrea called us, she had gone to the hillside to help. A neighbor had volunteered to look after Em. Andrea took rakes and shovels and joined Mark Hansen, who was on the tractor, in making a firebreak. The wind suddenly changed and blew the fire behind them. They had nowhere to go but up the slope.

When the hill got too steep, Mark realized they had to back down through the fire to get out of it. He pushed in the clutch to let the crawler roll backward through the flames more quickly than if it were in gear. He wrapped his shirt around Andrea's head to keep her hair from burning.

As soon as the tractor slowed enough, Andrea leaped off and ran through the fire, trying to get to the house. Mark stayed on the tractor long enough to turn it sideways to stop rolling. He jumped off and caught up with Andrea. Together they sprinted into a small canyon that would lead them home.

Layne and Jo were the first to arrive on the scene and to see the fire roaring up the mountainside. Layne sent Jo to the house. He saw the tractor still running on the hillside, engulfed in tornado-like flames swirling 20-30 feet into the air. He thought he saw two people running through the flames, then lost sight of them. Meanwhile, other firefighters were arriving, and Layne started organizing their strategy.

Jo arrived at the house just before Mark and Andrea staggered in. Mark called 911 and sent Andrea to the bathroom where he put down towels for her to lie on and tried to cool her burns. She had jumped off too soon, landing in the worst of the flames.

The firefighters were still looking for them on the hillside. Mark sent Jo back to the highway to get her dad, saving 20-30 minutes of precious time.

Layne and the EMTs rushed to the house to begin first aid, cooling Andrea's burns with towels and cold water and starting intravenous (IV) fluids. He inserted an IV into Andrea's foot; her legs and arms were

too burned, but her shoes had protected her feet.

He sent Mark to the shower to try to cool his burns. Mark had huge water blisters developing on his sides, and his face was badly burned. Layne called for two ambulances and two life flights — a plane and a helicopter.

Layne's quick thinking and his daughter's assistance saved precious time and Andrea's life. By the time the ambulances arrived, the EMTs already had given Andrea 4 liters of fluid (she received 20 more before takeoff). She was conscious through part of the 12-mile trip to town, but she lost consciousness as the ambulance emerged from the winding river canyon into the valley.

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When they reached the hospital, doctors and nurses were ready. They quickly got Andrea and Mark stabilized and prepared for the flight to Salt Lake City. Andrea was more critically burned, so she was taken by plane. After the ambulance left for the airport, we held Jim, Michael and Carolyn in an embracing circle for a moment of prayer, then gathered up little Em to take home with us. As we drove somberly up our creek, the airplane's lights went overhead, taking Andrea to an unknown destiny. She was in the doctors' hands. And God's.

The burn unit

Andrea arrived at the Burn Trauma Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in Salt Lake City at 4 a.m. She had third-degree burns (skin completely gone) on 42% of her body, and second-degree burns on 9%. Her arms and legs were the worst. The right side of her face was burned, and her voice box was

injured. Thankfully her eyes and lungs were OK.

The doctors in Salt Lake City said the work done by the EMTs and the doctors in our rural hospital saved her life. They had put the ventilator tube in her throat before it swelled shut, gotten fluids into her quickly, stabilized her and put her on the plane immediately.

Andrea had to stay on the ventilator for two weeks. Even then, it was touch and go for the first days. Her heart monitor sounded when her blood oxygen level and blood pressure dropped below viable ranges. Each time, she came back thanks to blood pressure medication given immediately and to her strong will to survive.

The vigil begins

Jim agonized over whether to go on the river trip he was supposed to guide or to go to Salt Lake City. Since Andrea would be heavily sedated for the first few days, he decided to do the river trip and skip the next one — to be with her later when she was awake. Lynn and a family friend drove to Salt Lake City the next day to be with Andrea, while Michael and Carolyn baled and stacked part of the hay we'd just cut. Then Michael and Carolyn went to stay with her so Lynn could do more haying.

Em stayed with me. The first weeks were traumatic for her. She didn't understand why her mama was gone. She had witnessed the fire and had watched the EMTs working on Andrea. She had nightmares about it, crying out in her sleep about the "scary guys."

Several times a day she'd ask where Mama was and tell me about the "scary guys," her mama's "dirty owies" and "two towels." I explained to her that Andrea was in the hospital having her owies fixed. Em understood about "owies," and she spent a lot of time putting sticker labels (which she used for bandages) on herself, her dolls and me as we played hospital.

I tape-recorded Em telling her mama the things we'd been doing at home. Even though Andrea was in and out of consciousness, we thought she might be able to listen. It might encourage her to survive. Andrea says she doesn't remember those early days, though later she appreciated hearing the tape and listening to Em on the phone. When they removed the ventilator and she was able to talk again, she and Em talked on the phone every day.

Family members took turns being with Andrea, alternating the work at home with the vigil at her bedside. Whoever stayed with Andrea at the hospital slept in a chair in her room.

Day to day

Several neighbors helped us during the following weeks. Em and I did the home chores whenever Lynn was gone. I'd usually sneak out early in the morning, hoping to get back before Em awakened. In the evenings she'd go with me, riding in the wheelbarrow when I took hay to the horses, helping drag the water hose and carrying the can of dog food to Grandpa's dog.

As the fires around our area worsened, there were many days we never saw the sun, and the smoke was so thick I stopped taking Em outside. Breathing the smoke gave her nosebleeds. Some days I didn't go outside at all except for chores; it was painful to breathe. We couldn't open our windows at night to cool the house, and smoke seeped in through the cracks around windows and doors.

The home vigil was not as traumatic as being at Andrea's bedside, but it was hectic trying to take care of the most urgent ranch tasks and Em while fielding telephone calls.

We were grateful for neighbors' help during the months we were so short-handed. I left Em with neighbors on several occasions when I had to check on range cattle or to help Carolyn move cattle to the next range pasture. She, the two kids and I did all the range riding during July and August. Nick, 7, and Heather, 9, were good help.

Healing

Andrea had her first skin graft five days after she arrived at Salt Lake City. It was imperative to get some covering on her arms and legs. Without skin, the body leaks fluids, which have to be replaced by IVs, and is more vulnerable to infection. For the first grafts, the doctors took strips of skin from her belly to stretch over her arms and right hand. Only the top layers of skin are taken, leaving a raw area that will regenerate.

The area where the skin is taken is more painful to the patient — until the raw places heal — than the burned areas. Third-degree burns have no feeling. The nerves are gone, but the exposed and damaged muscles are painful.



Thirty-seven days after the accident, Emily visited Andrea in the hospital for the first time.

The second surgery was 12 days later, taking strips of skin from her back to cover her lower legs and putting cadaver skin as a temporary covering on her upper legs (until her body rejected it). The third surgery, two weeks later, harvested more skin from her belly to cover her upper legs. The new skin had not regrown completely. The second crop always is more fragile, and those grafts didn't take as well.

The pain after each surgery was excruciating for several days. During the first two surgeries, she was still on the ventilator, and she was kept completely sedated afterward. For the third surgery, however, she was no longer on the ventilator, and they could not completely sedate her for fear she would be unable to breathe on her own.

Another painful aspect of the burn treatment was her daily "scrub" in the tank room — in which all the raw and healing areas were scrubbed to remove any dead tissue and the staples as the grafted areas started to heal.

Andrea was on a high level of pain medication for several days after the

surgeries, and the drugs often left her disoriented, with vivid hallucinations. One time she tried to get out of bed and fell — injuring her head and elbows. She didn't realize her legs didn't work.

Other setbacks included a lung infection, a section of graft that didn't take, and swelling of her legs and arms. She was on a feeding tube for three weeks and lost a lot of weight, even receiving 3,500 calories/day.

After they removed the feeding tube, her stomach was unaccustomed to food. Nothing tasted good, and she just couldn't eat. Family members tried to encourage her to eat a little every hour or so, and finally her appetite returned.

Physical therapists had been working with her constantly — even when she was bedfast (since grafted skin tends to shrink, tightening all the involved joints and hindering mobility). Now they started getting her up and helping her walk a few steps. She surprised them by walking farther than any other patient on the first attempt — 60 feet on the first try, and 75 feet the next day. This was a turning point. Being

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able to do something was a tonic, and Andrea started to progress more quickly. Her appetite improved as the exertion made her hungry.

Mother-daughter reunions

We decided Andrea was no longer too fragile to see Em. We had been hesitant to bring Emily to see her mother because she wouldn't understand seeing Mommy but not being able to touch her. Aug. 11 was the big day. Lynn and I took Em to Salt Lake City. We got there right after lunch. It was such a happy reunion! It had been 37 days since Em and I had seen Andrea.

Andrea was fragile, but Em was able to hug her and to sit on the bed with her. Em pushed Andrea in the wheelchair when she went for physical therapy. When Andrea did her walking exercise, Em walked alongside, holding Andrea's hand — serious in her

effort to help. That day, Andrea took her first unassisted steps.

When Andrea was well enough to leave the hospital, we arranged for her and Lynn to stay at a cousin's home nearby since she required daily outpatient treatment and therapy.

Lynn helped with Andrea's daily scrub and with bandaging and stretching her joints. He drove her to physical therapy and checkups. Andrea was (and still is) constantly tired — unable to sleep much at night because of the pain and the itching.

Andrea still had raw areas on her elbows and legs and deep holes in both Achilles tendons, but these seemed to be filling in gradually. Her daily scrub was becoming less tedious and less painful, though still an ordeal. They were bandaging about 36 raw places each time. By the time she came home, about a dozen raw areas remained.

Home

On Sept. 2, Andrea was able to come home. That was a happy day. We were fortunate to have our first real rain since the fires had started, clearing the smoke from the air. Even though the knee on which she had fallen several times while running through the fire (it was deeply burned) was still stiff, she insisted on seeing the horses that evening.

Andrea's progress has been in fits and starts. On her first return trip to Salt Lake City for a checkup, the doctors were not happy with the raw areas at her elbows. These had been growing larger due to the movement of the joints. She had to be scheduled for other skin grafts to cover those areas.

Recovery for a burn patient and for the family is slow. It's a long road with many obstacles. The physical therapy is hard, time-consuming work. Ideally Andrea should have at least two three-hour sessions daily to stretch stiffening joints. She also must wear pressure garments for a year or two, wearing them daily for as long as she can stand them to keep the grafted skin from overgrowing and making thick scar tissue. It takes years for full recovery.

Most folks assume that, once a patient is home, everything is OK. But in some ways, the longest road is just beginning. You get through the initial ordeal with grit and determination and the help and prayers of friends and family as you hope your loved one survives. The vigil as she stabilizes becomes a marathon of endurance.

The homecoming is a time of great rejoicing, but the daily struggle takes over as you deal with the patient's pain and frustration. The caregiving is ongoing, along with all the ranch chores. The hardest part for me is seeing my daughter hurt and discouraged and not being able to help. She has to find her own way through the uncharted aftermath of injuries that will change her life forever.

Effects on the ranch

The effects of the ordeal on our operation are many. Andrea has been an integral part of our ranch. She did much of the work with the cattle, tractors and day-to-day management. She rode range, checked fences and gates, and helped move cattle. She's been our best night calver and has a good touch with the first-calf heifers.

It will be a while before Andrea is recovered enough to help with calving. Her skin grafts are too fragile for any exertion. She'll also have difficulty with heat and sun in summer and cold in winter.

We'll try to make the January calving season as easy as possible. We plan to sell part of the cow herd this fall and almost all the coming first-calf heifers, to bring our cow numbers more in line with our winter feed situation.

We are extremely short on hay this year, not just because of the drought, but also because the irrigation was seriously neglected while Lynn was in Salt Lake City. The hay crop was short, as is our fall pasture.

This was the lost summer as far as any planned projects were concerned. Even the most urgent repair jobs were put on hold. We will deal with them as we can. Neighbors helped with high-priority things like haying and chopping larkspur on the high range before we put our cattle there. We are grateful. Still, there are many things for which a person just doesn't want to ask help.

Insurance woes

Our insurance has been another stress. Last year many ranching families in our valley changed insurance companies because costs kept escalating, and we couldn't afford the premiums. A salesman from a company supposedly geared toward small businesses and the self-employed sold a lot of insurance here. It was marketed as equivalent coverage. We bought the insurance, as did many of our



Emily often rode in the wheelbarrow to help Lynn or Heather do chores. Family members took turns staying with Andrea in the hospital, then coming home to keep up with the necessities of running the family ranch. Help from friends and neighbors made it possible.



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neighbors, Jim and Andrea, and Michael and Carolyn.

After the accident we discovered the coverage is *not* what we thought. As of early October, the insurance company had not officially responded to Andrea's hospital bill, doctor bills, surgeries, ambulance, flight costs, etc., but a representative told the hospital by phone that they would pay only \$18,000. We are now talking to the Idaho State Insurance Board and a lawyer. The total bill at this point is approaching \$500,000, and there will be more, as Andrea will need physical therapy for many months.

Ranchers are often unable to afford insurance. Many gamble on getting by without it, though they lead lives that are fraught with risk. Or they buy affordable insurance they think will protect them, as we did. The rude awakening — finding that we were not adequately protected — is traumatic.

The upside

The bright spot of the experience is the caring, the sharing and the community spirit that made us realize we are one big family. It is humbling to discover how much people care and how much they are willing to help.

While Andrea was in the hospital, our community conducted a benefit auction,



Emily played hospital, bandaging herself with stickers, while staying with grandparents Lynn and Heather.

with proceeds going to an assistance fund for her. Many people donated items for the auction — everything from homemade quilts to appliances, from dinners at local restaurants to stud fees and pedigreed dogs. A good crowd kept bidding and buying until midnight.

We are grateful to those who helped with the auction and to the friends who have kept us in their prayers. We continue to receive cards and letters wishing Andrea well; some have shared their experiences. Andrea had a long phone visit with a Nebraska rancher who was seriously burned 10 years ago. We never would have managed without the love and support of so many.

At the burn center, the dedicated nurses and doctors who cared for Andrea when her life hung in the balance and the other burn victims and families we met there have touched our lives deeply. The depth of caring is both humbling and elating as we discover a strong network of support. We never will be the same.

Once a week, recovering burn patients meet for a group-therapy session for the families of burn patients and in-hospital patients well enough to attend. Survivors share their experiences and progress and give encouragement to those whose burns are still severe and whose families are struggling to cope.

The burn center is a sobering place; some patients don't make it. But there are miracles, and there is joy in seeing near-death survivors walk out on their own. The bond that develops among strangers and the love that lifts broken spirits are wonderful to behold.

Several previous burn victims inspired Andrea while she was in the hospital, including a girl who rode horses and competed in rodeos. She was burned as severely as Andrea a year earlier and is now riding her horse again.

The circle continues. Before coming home in early September, Andrea had the opportunity to speak with and comfort one of two young men who had just arrived, and she and Lynn helped comfort their distraught families. Andrea plans to dedicate part of her life to helping burn victims.

Her accident this past summer did, indeed, change our lives. But it hasn't all been for the worse. It opened our eyes to realities we never fully acknowledged before now. It made us more aware of our common humanity, and it helped us see the true community spirit that underlies our little rural town.

We owe a large debt of gratitude to the volunteer EMTs and firefighters, for instance, who are as dedicated as any missionaries in their selfless calling. As Lynn puts it, "These volunteers give of their time so a lot of other folks will be able to have MORE time." They gave Andrea the rest of her life.



Editor's note: *An assistance fund has been established for Andrea. Contributions may be sent to the Andrea Thomas Daine Fund, First Security Bank, PO Box 810, Salmon, ID 83467.*