

A Valentine's Day To Remember

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How do you survive knowing your daughter may never be able to say another word to you again? It has been eleven months since the tragic car accident put then sophomore Elana Rosenberg in the hospital. Here, for the first time, Elana's family opens up about their lives since the tragic accident.

On the night of February 14, 2004, Valentine's day, the lives of scores of people drastically changed. At 10 o'clock local news stations reported a severe car accident on Sunset Blvd. Senior Max Rosenblum recalls the broadcast: "I remember I was watching the news and heard something about the accident. I remember thinking to myself, 'My god, this can happen to anyone... in the blink of an eye.'"

The worst nightmare of every parent in the country had occurred.

The event hit home when the students of Beverly learned that one of the victims in the accident was a Beverly student. Elana Rosenberg was in the hospital fighting for her life, teetering on the brink of death.

It has been eleven months since the horrific crash happened, but the damage is by no means a thing of the past. Elana has not recovered from the accident, and for all practical purposes, is in a conscious coma. This is a story about the fragility of life. It is a story about one family's struggle to surmount horribly grim odds. It is a story about love.

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In the shadows of Elana's untouched room stands a mother, gazing upon the flotsam and jetsam of Elana's life posted on a bulletin board, with a soft smile on her face. Elana's mother Brigitte recalls Elana's love of fashion: "She wanted to go to fashion design school in New York. Elana had plans," she says. On the bulletin board are various magazine cutouts - people Elana looked up to and possibly aspired to be one day. Tacked to the board is a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert ticket. "She loved music and going to concerts. I remember she used to play her music so loud... oh, it was so loud," Brigitte said with a smile on her face and a tear running down her left cheek. Posted on the board behind a magazine cutout was a slip Elana at some point got from a fortune cookie:

"A sudden change in plans will lead to good fortune."

Bringing New Meaning To "Loved One"

Elana was the kind of girl that would instantly ignite the flame in a room. She was the type of person that people wanted to be around: charismatic, outgoing, intelligent, focused, assertive, and a good friend. She was the type of girl that was so lovable that her parent's

friends wanted to spend more time with her than her parents. She frequented the malls, for one of her biggest interests was fashion, and her pastime was shopping. She was a member of the tennis team, and she enjoyed skiing.

It was a family tradition to go out to dinner every Sunday evening. She was very close to her family. Her mother remembers the many occasions Elana would call home between classes just to say hi. Elana lived a life like many other teenagers - hanging out with friends on the weekends, enjoying music, and chatting on the phone.



What better place to go than New York if one enjoys fashion. It was here that Elana's parents Brigitte and Mario Rosenberg planned to go on a surprise trip with her. She knew that they were going to go to New York, but her parents were planning on surprising her with the itinerary which included such activities as Broadway shows, another one of Elana's interests. Little did she know as she stepped into her friend, Jason Naysan's car that evening, that she would not be able to take that trip.

A Night Of Tragedy

It was late evening, and Mario and Brigitte were out to dinner when Mario received a call on his cell phone. Elana was involved in a car accident on Sunset and Hillcrest said the voice, a parent of one of the people involved in the crash. Mario thought that it was probably just a minor accident - perhaps a few band-aids would be necessary.



(pictured above is the stretch of Sunset Blvd. where the accident occurred)

Minutes later Mario and Brigitte were at the intersection. Mario announced he was a doctor and broke through the police barricades to get to the scene of the five-car pile up. Looking back, the mass hysteria was somewhat of a blur to both of Elana's parents. There were sirens, flashing lights, frantic yelling, police, fire, paramedics, and passing traffic. When Mario finally broke through he saw his daughter's mangled body on the pavement. She was dead. Lifeless. Not breathing. The paramedics put Elana on a stretcher before her father's eyes and brought her back to life.

Forty-five minutes and a grueling ambulance ride to Cedars Sinai later, Elana was in surgery. She had suffered massive brain trauma, and her only hope was for doctors to remove sections of her brain to relieve pressure. Two hours later, a doctor walked outside of the operating room and pulled Mario aside.

"She isn't going to make it," the doctor said.

A Community Unified

A simple mistake can leave a life in shambles... in a matter of moments. Friends, family, teachers, and even people that had never spoken to her, but had perhaps seen her around Beverly Hills High School, were shocked.

"You're still in a dream state when you hear something so awful as this has happened to a friend," said Jason Larian, remembering his thoughts immediately after hearing news of the accident. As the reality of the news set in with the students, their sympathy grew, and they came to understand just how fragile life is.

Dr. Dan Stepenosky described the student support as "wonderful and heartfelt".

Shortly after the accident, a chain email started going around the internet where Beverly students expressed their sympathy and intense prayers of hope that Elana would recover. In its final circulation, the email contained hundreds of notes addressed to Elana wishing her good fortune.

Friends, relatives, students, and school administrators traveled to visit Elana in the hospital. They created a bulletin board of cards and mementos, and at school students created posters filled with messages from students and teachers. These posters were placed in her hospital room.



(pictured above is a bulletin board for Elana created by family and friends, and posted in her recovery center room)

The commemorative website www.healelana.com was also created to inform people of Elana's condition, and for people to post their own thoughts. The forum on the website includes hundreds of heartfelt posts reflecting just how many people (some who have never even spoken to her) have so much love for her.

One recent post reads:

"I was just taking a look at the eighth grade yearbook and every page I turned to, I couldn't help thinking about you. I miss you so much; your smile, your presence, everything. The pictures and messages you left me in the yearbook reminded me of how large a piece of my life is missing in high school because you are not there."

There is a plethora of messages of love, and there are also some messages of anger and hurt that this could happen to Elana: "NO ONE SHOULD SUFFER WHAT SHE HAS SUFFERED. NO ONE KNOWS HER PAIN. IS THERE A MIRACLE FOR HER? IS THERE JUSTICE? IS THERE A MIRACLE?" reads another post. Through the love and anger comes a central theme, however, that she is cared for, the community stands behind her, and everyone is wishing she will recover.

Elana's temple, Temple Emanuel, has also given her much support. A group of people from the temple assembled and brought the Rosenberg family dinner once a week for a few months as a sign of support. Since the accident, there have been healing services for Elana the first Friday of each month. Even ten months after the accident, the power of the people in attendance for the December 3 healing service could be felt. Gathered around a circle

was a hodge-podge of relatives, friends, and a cantor, all connected by their desire for Elana to recover. After twenty-five minutes of solemn song, prayer, and recitation of poetry and prose written to Elana, the service was over. In attendance was Jason Nayssan, the driver of the car Elana was in during the accident. He was hospitalized with lesser injuries.

There is only so much suffering one can withstand. As the months have gone by, support for Elana and her family has gradually subsided. The constant calls of condolence are infrequent now, and loose family friends have stopped calling altogether. Perhaps they do not want to deal with the sorrow the Rosenbergs are going through. When someone dies, everyone moves on. But in this case, Elana has survived, so her parents cannot do so. Some friends, however, *have* moved on, and it is devastating for Elana's family.

A Family's Struggle

Many say losing a child is perhaps the most painful experience one can endure. Parents go through their lives trying to care for their children the best they can. But who would have ever imagined raising a daughter for 17 years, and then losing her soul, but being reminded every day of her past, because she is not physically gone.

"My eloquence fails me..." said Dr. Stepenosky, "there aren't any words to describe what Elana and her family have gone through."

In Mario and Brigitte's den sits a poster with Elana's picture and scores of written notes from friends and relatives to Elana. Just in front of the poster, Mario and Brigitte turned to one another and agreed, "We have aged more during the last year than in the last 20 years combined."

Losing a daughter is not something that passes with time, surely not when the daughter is still alive. Not when her parents see her lying in a bed, smiling and giggling, unable to utter a word, or comprehend what is said. "I drop [Elana's sister] Raquel off at the high school every day, and I see all the students walk to their classes with such joy... Elana loved the high school... and then I drive to see Elana at the hospital everyday, all day."

Every day, every day, every day: it is a thought that ruminates among Brigitte and Mario's minds. Take every day as it comes. Endure. Make the one-hour commute to the recovery center in Long Beach where she is staying. Cope with her daily physical therapy routines in an attempt to rehabilitate her body so that she can once again move, and walk, and talk. Pray for Elana every day. Remind her that her parents are not giving up on her; that they will always be there for her.

When asked how she can go on knowing her daughter may never recover, Brigitte warmly uttered, "That is what parents do - they try their hardest, offer their best, no matter what the hardships."

Take every day as it comes. That is how Brigitte and Mario cope. "You can't change what has happened." said Mario. Despite his strong background in medicine, to date, he has not looked at a single X-ray, CAT scan, or picture of the accident. The pain is simply too unbearable, and as he affirmed, the past cannot be changed.

Elana has suffered traumatic brain injury, and it has resulted in the loss of her motor

skills, ability to talk, her comprehension, and quite possibly her memory.

"You have no idea what it is like to have a daughter that has a mouth that can't speak, a nose that can't smell, eyes that can barely see, arms that can't move; you tell me if you think that is a life." Brigitte exclaimed.

Even though Elana was just a helpless passenger in the car, she was the one left paralyzed.

Not much could prepare a parent to even fathom an accident like this, let alone imagine how to withstand the anguish. "We knew driving is risky, and that an accident could happen, but we never thought this would happen to us - it happens to other people, but when it happens to you, it destroys your life."

According to Mario, Elana always had a slight fear of the danger involved in driving.

Mario and Brigitte have spent countless hours with Elana beside her hospital bed, and with each hour spent, the pain of not having the Elana they remember grows. "The impact of the accident didn't come right away. I felt we lost our daughter. The impact dawns on you over the months. And now it has been eleven months and it's harder and harder as the time goes by."

Sometimes Elana is taken back to her home for the weekend. Since she needs 24-hour care, it is a heavy stress on her family, but it is a stress worth taking. Her occasional trips home take her one step closer to bringing back the days that she could walk around her home freely. It is unclear as to whether she remembers her house or not, and due to the heavy wheel chair equipment, she cannot be brought upstairs to her room. She hasn't entered it since the day of the accident.

Every evening Elana's parents and sometimes friends and other relatives return home from the recovery center to a life without Elana: a home with a deserted room and an empty dining room seat. "Every night we come home and are reminded of her - she's alive, but she isn't." said Brigitte.

A Strong Fighter

A simple mistake can leave a life in shambles, but Elana endured against all odds. She was a fighter when she came into this world, and she surely was not going to leave it any differently.



It took much effort before Brigitte was able to have her first child. Brigitte and Mario wanted nothing more than a child together, and they tried hard to allow for this. Nothing worked until finally their "miracle baby" as they call Elana, was created. "She has always been a fighter," her parents agreed.

Elana has remained the same strong person she was. After the accident, her heart stopped and she stopped breathing, but even death was not too much for her to overcome. After being revived, she immediately underwent a number of brain surgeries upon arriving at the hospital. She was given medication to put her under an induced coma. The doctors concurred that little could save her, and that she would probably die.

Portions of her brain had been severely damaged, and her body had to be reconstructed due to various broken bones. Her injuries were so severe that she was in the Intensive Care Unit for three months. It wasn't until three to four months after the accident that Elana even started to show signs of response to any stimuli; it was nearly three weeks until she even opened her eyes.

On April 5, she was released from the ICU to another room at Cedars Sinai, and nine days later she was moved to the Children's Hospital to begin rehabilitation therapies six days a week. There, she spent hours every day in speech therapy to attempt to get her mouth muscles working. She also underwent occupational therapy and physical therapy to mend her lost motor skills and use of muscles.

Other than during times of the various brain surgeries she has had over the past months, Elana as of July has been receiving 24-hour-a-day care at the Hillcrest recovery center, a long-term rehabilitation home. There she has gone through daily physical therapy. She is showing some promise - little things such as grunting in displeasure, or smiling and giggling at positive stimuli, making first steps in being able to repeat simple words, and being able to chew soft solids. It is still hard to know what she comprehends and remembers. Doctors, family, and friends have tried rigorously to devise a method of communication with her; mechanisms such as yes and no light up buttons, but as of yet, they have come up short.

Between the brain surgeries and toilsome physical therapies, Elana is generally in her bed, trapped in her body, largely unable to communicate. She enjoys watching movies. According to her nurse, she has seen *White Chicks* on at least a hundred occasions, and she laughs every time. Often Brigitte will read Elana's favorite magazines to her, such as *US Weekly*. Friends and other relatives visit and talk to her, but she can only respond with nods and smiles.

Tacked onto the wall at the Hillcrest Recovery Center is a note to Elana that a friend posted:

"Now here I am, on my way to visit you in Long Beach, and all I can think about is what would have happened if instead of going to Las Vegas that weekend in February, I had come to visit you like you asked. As I sat beside you yesterday, I realized that despite the accident, I see your smile and it reminds me of our endless gossips online... I look into your eyes and see that fun, sweet girl I got to know."



It has been eleven months since the emergency room doctor on duty said Elana would not make it through the night, but Elana has always been a fighter. From the depths of Elana's care center room lies a speckle of hope - a smile. With every one of her giggles, nobody can help but love her and hope for a "r'fu-a sh'lei-ma," a renewal of body and spirit, even if she is not the Elana she once was.