

Arizona Daily Star

Road to recovery

Bonnie Henry, ARIZONA DAILY STAR

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A.E. Araiza / Arizona Daily Star

Instead of a Stanford dorm room as a scholarship athlete, Tucson High grad Joe Kay still has his room at home as he recovers.

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Star athlete **Joe Kay** battles back from stroke

The motions are endless, repetitive, mind-numbing.

Walk the hall, climb the stairs, pick up bolts, lift a cup to the mouth.

Throughout the therapy, **Joe Kay's** expression remains the same: a slight smile, with no hint of anger or frustration.

It's been eight months since the former standout athlete suffered a stroke during a melee celebration at Tucson High Magnet School after a basketball game with Salpointe High School.

Kay, just hours shy of his 18th birthday, was still on the court when he was tackled and lifted off his feet by an exuberant fan.

In those few seconds, **Kay's** carotid artery was torn, causing a massive stroke, and with it partial paralysis.

Life changed - perhaps forever - for **Joe Kay** on Feb. 6.

Instead of attending Stanford University this fall on a volleyball scholarship, this National Merit Scholar is trying to regain the use of his right hand, trying to walk without a limp, trying to speak without pause, trying to remaster all that he knew just mere months ago.

"His speech is good, but he's lost some symbols and language," says **Kay's** mother, Suzanne Rabe, a law professor at the University of Arizona.

Her life - and that of **Joe's** father, Fred **Kay** - was also turned upside down by their son's injury.

"I don't believe God gave this to **Joe**," says his mother. "I believe random, awful things happen to good people. I see nothing good out of this."

And yet in the next breath she concedes: "Certainly, **Joe's** character has been tested.

Our family has been tested. We never knew how strong we were."

"He couldn't talk"

Both parents were at the game that night. Suzanne was with her mother, who was in a wheelchair. "I couldn't find a safe, secure place for my mother. We ended up wheeling her next to the Salpointe bench. My husband was on the other side."

"The crowd was so wild," says Fred. "I'd been to many other games, but I'd never seen that much of crowd. It was just raucous."

After the game, Fred was working his way to the court. Although he didn't see the actual impact, he saw **Joe** go down.

"I was cradling him. He couldn't talk, couldn't seem to get up. His jaw was moving in a strange and unnatural way."

Joe has no memory of the incident, nor does he know who tackled him. "I remember opening my eyes. I was down on the floor. I remember the coach's brother coming to help me into the locker room."

Meanwhile, Suzanne was blissfully oblivious. "The team and coaches were coming over to the house for **Joe's** birthday. I was saying, 'Hey, we're having pizza at our house. Come over.'

"Finally, someone came over and said, 'You're needed in the locker room.' " Within minutes, **Joe** was being taken to University Medical Center.

All night long, the hospital swarmed with **Joe's** teammates and coaches.

The next morning, Fred and Suzanne were told their son had suffered a stroke.

"The doctor told us it was large, permanent and devastating," says Suzanne. "So then Fred and I had to go out and tell the coaches and the players."

"I told them, 'Don't pity **Joe**. He's never failed at anything he's ever done in his life and he won't fail at this.' "

Life in therapy

One week later, **Joe** was transferred to Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix on the advice of his half-brother, Alec **Kay**, a physical therapist in Anchorage, Alaska. For six weeks, **Joe** lived at Barrow, while Suzanne and Fred stayed at a nearby hotel. When it became clear **Joe** would continue at Barrow as an outpatient, his parents rented an apartment.

Fred, who recently retired from the federal Public Defender's Office, stays in Phoenix with **Joe** weekdays, ferrying him to therapy sessions. Weekends, they return to Tucson.

Suzanne also splits her time between Tucson and Phoenix.

During those first six weeks at Barrow, **Joe** was "tremendously upbeat and optimistic," Suzanne says. "He would not allow pity. If I got even a tiny tear in my eye, he wouldn't have it."

"He worked his heart out day and night. He would lie on a mat and they would push against him. They did electrical stimulation, lots of exercises. They put air splints on his arm, to hold it rigid and get him to try to move from the shoulder."

"When you have a stroke, there is tremendous fatigue. He could barely keep his eyes open."

Yet at night, says Suzanne, "He would be the only one in the rehab program in the gym."

Meanwhile, **Joe's** friends kept the **road** humming between Tucson and Phoenix - so

much so that his parents finally had to limit the visits.

Before long, **Joe's** speech was coming back. "But sometimes he couldn't connect the words or come up with the right word," says Suzanne. "The speech therapist told us people who have trouble saying words can sometimes sing them.

"So I said, '**Joe**, let's sing.' We sang song after song after that: 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat.' 'This Land is Your Land.' 'The ABC Song.' He couldn't say his ABCs but he could sing them."

Dogged therapy also brought back **Joe's** face, which had drooped on one side following the stroke. "He worked and worked on his facial expressions," says Suzanne.

"I would look into a mirror and frown, try to do a goofy smile," says **Joe**.

While his speech was initially pocked with stops and stammers, **Joe** could read from the beginning, says Suzanne.

"He was reading Time, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated. His friends were bringing him terrible magazines. He read those. I didn't care."

Games and "Walk, **Joe**, walk"

During the summer when Suzanne stayed in Phoenix, she and **Joe** played math games, word games, Trivial Pursuit.

"Every day, **Joe** would come home from therapy just beat," says Suzanne. "He would jump in the pool to relax, then insist I go out there and go through a box of Trivial Pursuit. We went through American history. Then it was geography."

Despite his hard work, **Joe** was still in a wheelchair when his sister-in-law, Laurie **Kay**, came to visit in March.

Laurie, who's married to Alec **Kay**, also is a physical therapist.

"Laurie took **Joe** into a long hall with a rail late at night at Barrow," says Suzanne.

"She stood behind **Joe** and lifted him out of that wheelchair. She supported **Joe** and screamed, 'Walk, **Joe**, walk.' "

Says **Joe**: "I was pumped up, motivated. She gave me an extra push." At the end of six days, **Joe** walked. By summer, he was walking unaided, with a slight limp.

Working muscles and brain

Last spring, **Joe** faced a bout of depression. Though it lifted, a "fog" still settles over him from time to time, never lasting more than a couple of hours.

"I'm not at all sad, not at all vegging out," says **Joe**. "I can't think as straight, can't see quite as clearly as I could. It just goes away."

In June, he left Barrow for a two-week visit to Anchorage.

On his return, he began physical therapy at SouthWest Advanced Neurological Rehabilitation, but continues speech and cognitive therapy at Barrow for 90 minutes, Monday to Thursday.

"We do a bunch of tasks and drills," says **Joe**. "One is word fluency. We name as many words that start with a certain letter." Ever competitive, he adds, "Yesterday, I was in the 98th percentile."

Once done at Barrow, **Joe** faces a full day - 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. - at SouthWest.

Most days, he runs forward and walks backward on a treadmill, his 6-foot 6-inch frame supported in a sling.

He walks up and down stairs, then practices running, jumping, and skipping outside. Every move is aimed at working muscles and reorganizing the brain to improve its

function, says **Kay** Wing, physical therapist and owner of the center. "It takes hundreds of thousands of repetitions," she says.

Joe also gets sensory stimulation on his right arm to bring back the feeling. "We will ask him, 'Do you know where your arm is?'" says Wing. "It's coming, but it's not there yet."

For now, **Joe's** right hand cannot function without a spring-loaded apparatus that slips over his hand, enabling it to grasp and release.

"It's completely mechanical," says **Joe**. "It has springs attached to the fingers. I can flex my fingers but not release them. The spring helps me release."

Called the Functional Tone Management System, this futuristic device is no magic cure. "The magic for stroke **recovery** is hard work," says Wing.

How to pay the bills?

All that hard work, of course, comes at a price: \$250,000, so far, in medical bills.

Although **Joe's** hospital bills at UMC and inpatient costs at Barrow were covered by Fred's insurance, coverage for his outpatient therapy was long ago exhausted.

Tucson Unified School District carries a medical insurance policy to cover catastrophic injuries, says attorney Jerald Wilson, who represents the district. That policy just kicked in and claims are starting to be paid, says Suzanne.

Even so, myriad other expenses are mounting, ranging from the apartment rental in Phoenix to adaptive equipment so **Joe** can drive a car. Insurance covers none of those things, says Suzanne.

In mid-December, **Joe** will be done with his current regimen. "In January, we'll assess, see what's happening with **Joe's** therapy," says Suzanne.

Until then, at least, **Joe** will continue his weekday therapy in Phoenix. Come the weekends, he's back in Tucson, hanging out with friends, even visiting them in their UA dorms.

He has no doubt that a year from now, he'll be a college student as well. Stanford has pledged to honor his scholarship.

"Whether I'm playing volleyball or not, either way I'll be a freshman at Stanford," he says. His ultimate goal: "I want to get as much back as I can, so that people can't notice."

He harbors no blame, no bitterness. "I don't blame the kids who tackled me," he says. "Life is kind of crazy. It takes lots of twists and turns. It's too bad it had to take this turn, but I'm going to go through it as best I can."