

Picking Up the Pieces

By Ken Testorff,
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Life was good for Petty Officer Second Class Laura Chmielewski when 2002 arrived. The 22-year-old, three-and-a-half-year Navy veteran liked her signalman job aboard USS *Howard* (DDG-83). She also liked a certain guy, PO1 Matthew Cowen, whom she had met in Jacksonville, Fla.; they had started dating in 2000. Their budding relationship had Laura entertaining thoughts about reenlisting—she wanted to be able to stay close to her boyfriend, on sea or shore duty.

That “good life,” however, changed dramatically the afternoon of Jan. 31, 2002, as Laura was riding her motorcycle through the streets of sunny Coronado, Calif., en route to the beach. A car driven by an 89-year-old Coronado man suddenly pulled in front of her bike at an intersection. She saw the car crossing the three-lane thoroughfare and tried to stop but lost control and skidded. “I went one way, and the cycle went another [*hitting a rear wheel of the car*],” she explained. “The rest is hazy. I awoke and my body felt hot. I didn’t feel like I was bleeding, but I knew I was badly hurt—I couldn’t move at all.”

A motorist who witnessed the crash gave police a description of the car, which, according to him, hesitated only briefly before the driver sped through the intersection without checking to see what he had done. The driver later would acknowledge having heard a “cracking noise” behind him when he went through the intersection but said he checked and determined nothing was wrong, so he just drove off. The witness followed the car long enough to get the license number, which he passed to the police, who

quickly traced the license plate to the 89-year-old. He lived only a few blocks away.

A week after Laura’s crash, police interviewed more witnesses to the accident scene, including a woman who told them she had seen the driver stop for a few seconds. According to her, he looked toward Laura sprawled in the roadway, and then drove off. She had no doubt the driver knew he had been involved in a crash.

Police arrested the 89-year-old on suspicion of felony hit-and-run but subsequently released him while submitting the case to the district attorney’s office. He was ordered to be in court March 25 but didn’t appear.

Meanwhile, the investigation determined the accused was an incompetent motorist—the state revoked his driver’s license July 2. A six-member sheriff’s unit simultaneously began searching for the missing 89-year-old but admitted their chances of finding him weren’t very good. As they explained, he was one of 17,000 fugitives wanted on felony warrants.

Navy photo by PHAN Richard Waite

Laura’s former ship, USS *Howard* (DDG-83), prepares to come alongside another ship for replenishment.





Laura on the slopes at Snowmass, Colo., during the 19th National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic.

These developments were discouraging for Laura who, by now, had received a medical discharge [*in October 2002*] from the Navy and was at a VA medical facility undergoing four hours of physical therapy each day. Did I mention the crash had left her paralyzed from the chest down?

After performing two spinal surgeries, doctors still couldn't offer any concrete hope for Laura's recovery. "They wouldn't tell me whether I ever would be able to walk again," she said, "so I decided on my own to do something about it. My injuries are a little different from what other people experience: I still can wiggle my toes, and I have about 70 percent sensation. I can stand and do some walking with the help of braces and a walker."

When Laura had completed the four months of rehabilitation at the VA medical facility, she went to a gym and started doing stretching and strengthening exercises. "I did really well there," she noted, "and

decided to increase my rehabilitation regimen. For an hour and a half a day, four days each week, I went to physical therapy. I also had acupuncture treatments twice a week, went to aqua therapy once a week, and started riding horses. All these efforts improved my condition to the point where I could walk about 20 feet with the walker and braces when I left California."

Laura subsequently got involved in skiing and, in April 2005, traveled to Snowmass, Colo., where she participated in the 19th National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. Co-sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Disabled American Veterans, this clinic is the largest annual rehabilitation event of its kind in the world. Laura was one of more than 300 U.S. military veterans from 47 states who gathered to learn or to improve their skills in adaptive Alpine and Nordic skiing and snowboarding.

"I just started skiing a few months before coming to the Winter Sports Clinic," said Laura, once she arrived at the five-day event. "This is my first time, and I look forward to a whole new experience on the mountain." She hadn't always felt that way, though. "I was so stuck on learning how to walk again that I didn't want to do anything adaptive at first," she explained. "But, now that I know how much fun it is, I'm going to continue skiing. I also plan to try archery at the summer games."

What else is in Laura's future? Marriage. She and Matthew, who is out of the Navy now and working as a service technician, plan to "tie the knot" Oct. 14, 2006. They will continue residing in upstate New York, where both currently live.

Whatever happened to the motorist who left Laura and her motorcycle in the middle of the road that day in January 2002? He reportedly moved to Mexico "to be with a sick female friend" but returned to San Diego when he learned he was a wanted fugitive. He entered a no-contest plea, which is the equivalent of a guilty plea.

According to Laura, the motorist didn't serve any time in state prison because of his age. Instead, he had to pay some restitution and did some community service. He was allowed to go back to Mexico but had to report for probation for five years.

What lessons did Laura learn from her crash? It pays to wear the required personal protective equipment—she had it all. She also had attended the required training course. And, although she can't prove it, Laura feels the backpack she was wearing the day of her incident may have contributed to the severity of her injuries. The backpack contained her uniform, a pair of sneakers, and an aerosol can. ■