



### staying close

Senior Lauren Gibbert, and juniors Madison Winchell, Carley Wallace and Paige Gibbert hang out in the aftermath of the horror of the wreck and enjoy the ability to stay close to one another and become even closer friends with an even stronger bond.

k. brinkmeyer

# We're Still HERE

Accident strengthens bonds of friendship as survivors recover, heal

It was a regular night. Almost repetitive as juniors Paige Gibbert, Carley Wallace, Madison Winchell and senior Lauren Gibbert piled into a vehicle while reminiscing on the day's activities, never imagining the nightmare ahead.

"We had been mudding because it had rained, and that's why the three of us were in the front seat," Carley said. "We were just going to grab my bag from my house."

The driver, Madison, was making her way to Carley's house as the rain covered the road with water. Within seconds, the car hydroplaned and spun out of control into a telephone pole, causing the frame of the truck to fold and the pole to fall on top of the vehicle.

"I woke up at one point, and I think Carley was screaming out prayers," Lauren said. "I was going in and out of consciousness, and I remember waking up and there was a seat belt wrapped around my neck. I remember people hovering over me, and then I don't remember anything else."

All four girls were safely removed from the vehicle and transported to the hospital. Still in serious pain, they attempted to make each other laugh while in the ambulance.

"I woke up in the ambulance, and I remember Madison was holding my arm," Lauren said. "I was thinking about where everyone was, and I was trying to figure out how we crashed. I tried to lighten the mood when we were in the ambulance and crack a joke to Madison about her driving skills."

The arrival at the hospital marked the beginning of what was ahead: separation, shock and pain as the girls were treated for their injuries in separate areas of the hospital.

Even though they suffered from numerous injuries, they tried to remain positive. Madison came out of the crash with broken hips, pelvis, right femur, pubic bone and rib. Carley broke her vertebrae in two places and her ankle. Paige experienced a collapsed lung. Lauren broke

her neck, ankle and wrist. Paige returned to school shortly after the wreck, but Lauren and Carley didn't return until after Christmas break. Madison was unable to come back to school until almost four months later in March.

"Now I don't take anything for granted, and I always tell my parents I love them because you never know what could happen," Carley said. "There is no way we could have made it through that wreck without God, just looking at the pictures of the truck."

The support system offered from friends and family gave the girls a much more positive outlook on their situation.

"I think that having so many people that care and so many visitors has helped me the most," Lauren said. "I love hearing them tell me how grateful they are that we're still here."

Without God on their side, the girls felt like survival would not have been possible.

"God was really protecting us because the doctors said that everyone who has the same break in the neck as me was either paralyzed or dead," Lauren said. "I am so lucky. This experience has strengthened my faith in God; He is always there when you need Him."

Since the night of the crash, the bond between the girls continued to grow and become stronger than ever.

"We're all still best friends. I think the thing that has helped me recover the most are friends and family," Madison said. "My boyfriend and all my friends have been amazing through every step of this journey."

Through all of the tears and heartache, the girls couldn't have been more grateful for their miraculous health after the accident.

"[The wreck] is something that taught me more than hurt me," Paige said. "It taught me that some people can't even go to school, so I should be grateful I get to come everyday and I'm healthy enough to do that. It taught me to be grateful for the little things." *story by m. hunley*

