

Gresham mom's life shattered by hit-and-run

Posted by Sieon Roux, The Oregonian September 27, 2008 21:05PM

Anita Perry had a hard life long before a doped-up driver in a Chevy Astro van left her crushed and bleeding on a Gresham sidewalk in front of her terrified child.

When Perry was 16, her mother up and left their Florida home without so much as a note. She hitchhiked across the country to find her mother, but soon ended up living alone.

Torsten Kjellstrand/The Oregonian Anita Perry lies in bed day after day, broken by a van that ran her down as she walked home with her son. She has received an eviction notice and has huge medical bills.

She had a couple of children and broke up with their father. She worked a series of minimum-wage jobs. And she also got into trouble for shoplifting and theft.

After a few evictions when Perry didn't make rent, she and her children settled into a tiny, one-bedroom apartment in the heart of Gresham's Rockwood neighborhood.

"Back then, it was tough, but it was good," Perry said. "I'd complain at night when my feet hurt, but that was it."

Life went from rough to horrible the night of Feb. 4, 2007. Perry was walking on the sidewalk with her son when Lori Pope, 44, careened across three lanes of traffic into Perry, then 36, and drove away. Two weeks ago, Pope was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison as part of a plea deal.

Perry didn't attend the sentencing. She rarely goes anywhere, and then only by ambulance because she can't walk.

"I wish I could trade places with her," Perry said when told that Pope was going to prison.

Two police officers, a social worker, a prosecutor and a doctor say Perry's case is one of the most wrenching they've seen -- not only because of the extent of Perry's injuries, but because her and her family's suffering goes on and on.

A dozen broken bones

When Perry was run over, the impact broke more than a dozen bones, including in her pelvis, both her legs and her spine in three places. Perry spent three months in a hospital, then three months in a nursing home.

The tires flattened her internal organs. She has developed an inoperable hernia that has swollen to the size of a basketball, making sitting up painful.

More than 1 1/2 years after the crash, she still spends nearly every waking hour lying on a hospital bed in front of the TV in her living room. Painkillers make it hard for her to stay awake for long.

"I went from kind of cute to gray and fat and ugly," Perry said, embarrassed to have gained so much weight.

Looks, though, are the least of Perry's worries. One doctor, she says, has told her she might not live more than six months.

Perry says her kids know the prognosis. Tino, who was 11 at the time of the crash, has struggled to keep going to school. He has developed a nervous tic and recently started seeing a therapist. Tino, who turned 13 on Friday, sleeps on the couch to be near his mother.

"Sometimes I stop breathing at night and he jumps up and turns on the light to make sure I have what I need," said Perry, who has asthma.

Tino's sister, 15-year-old Juanita, missed school to take care of her mother when she came home from a nursing home. The kids did the grocery shopping, cooked meals and cleaned the house. Juanita bathed her mother.

Six months ago, state assistance enabled Perry to hire her aunt -- a caregiver by profession -- as her full-time aide.

Eviction notice arrives

Perry's most immediate worry, however, is not her health. Earlier this month, she received an eviction notice for failing to pay her \$525 monthly rent -- her second in as many months.

Torsten Kjellstrand/The Oregonian Juanita Perry, 15, and Tino Perry, 13, catch up with their mother, Anita, at their Gresham apartment after school. The siblings have missed some school to care for her mother, but now Anita Perry's aunt serves as her full-time aide.

Perry says she receives about \$500 in food stamps and \$387 in cash assistance, formerly known as welfare. The Oregon Department of Human Services won't confirm the amount of aid that Perry receives, citing confidentiality.

She says she also received Social Security disability payments that allowed her to pay her rent, but federal officials cut her off in July after learning she had arrest warrants.

At the time of the crash, Perry was wanted for failing to do community service after being convicted of shoplifting from Nordstrom at Clackamas Town Center in March 2000. According to Florida officials, she is also wanted for writing \$400 worth of bad checks -- and failing to pay \$955 in restitution and report for her sentence, six months of probation.

"I was stupid," Perry said, "just stupid."

Unable to get out of bed on her own -- let alone work -- Perry is caught in limbo.

Gresham police Officer John Rasmussen, the first cop to respond to the accident, has tried to help. Rasmussen persuaded Clackamas County to drop its warrant and the requirement that she complete community service.

He also started to do the same thing in Florida, but had not had his calls returned.

Robert Bowers, Walton County, Fla., probation manager, said he didn't know that Perry was bedridden. Bowers said a Florida judge might be willing to cancel the warrant upon seeing documentation of her injuries, but only if her victims were paid the restitution.

Rasmussen says the courts should take the circumstances into account.

"This is definitely someone who has made poor choices in the past, but to me she's never tried to explain away her choices," Rasmussen said.

"When she's punished, her children are punished, too," he said.

Since the accident, Rasmussen -- an officer of three years and a father of two -- has checked in frequently with Tino. He has given the boy his cell phone number and he encourages Tino to keep going to school. The officer tells Tino to stop walking around Rockwood at 2 a.m. Sometimes, Tino tells him, he just has to get out of the apartment.

"Poor Tino," Rasmussen said. "My heart goes out to Tino. I mean, poor mom. But he was watching."

33 prescriptions

Prosecutors subpoenaed medical records that showed that Lori Pope, the driver, made more than 50 visits to doctors within six months -- before and after the crash -- and had been prescribed the highly addictive narcotic Dilaudid 33 times. Prosecutors say Pope often complained of pain, but doctors could find no reason for it. She received a dose of Dilaudid just before the crash.

Unlike many states, Oregon has no database that doctors and pharmacists can use to check whether a patient has a pattern of trying to obtain painkillers or other commonly abused drugs.

Paige Clark, a pharmacist consultant for the Oregon Board of Pharmacy, said proponents of such a database will try again next year to persuade legislators to establish one to thwart "doctor-shopping."

Perry was relieved to hear that Pope got some prison time. Judge Julie Frantz also ordered Pope, who was on Social Security disability, to pay \$750,000 in restitution. If she can pay, the money will go toward medical bills. Perry's hospital bills are close to \$1 million.

Perry has yet to receive an apology from Pope, but says she doesn't hold much ill will against her.

"I don't have hate towards her," Perry said. "But now I'm stuck. I don't get to see the sun shining. ... I'm severely depressed."

Perry's bed is positioned away from the windows because light hurts her eyes. She'd like to talk to a psychologist but she can't afford one.

"She's got no life," said B.J. Perry, Anita Perry's mom. "She doesn't go anywhere. She stares at four walls. That's worse than prison."