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Wedding role marked a dad’s ‘amazing’ recovery – thanks to Sac State grad students

Before Eva Fields married Brent Schwartz on Sunday, July 7, in Sacramento, the question was: Would her father walk her down the aisle, take her hand for the traditional father-daughter dance and offer a toast to the newlyweds?

It’s what fathers do – but anyone who saw Don Fields three years ago, after his devastating cerebral hemorrhage, might not have thought it possible.

“The doctors said, ‘You probably don’t want this guy to wake up,’ ” his daughter recalls. “He’s had numerous brain surgeries. He can’t swallow. He falls. He’s hard to understand. They told me if he lived, his life would be hell. What they didn’t tell me was how much fun it would be to watch him improve.”

“It’s amazing,” says Don Fields, flashing a big grin. “I’m lucky to be alive.”

Among those invited to the wedding were the Sacramento State graduate students from the Physical Therapy and Speech Pathology departments who spent months helping Don Fields prepare for his daughter’s special day – and the years to come.

“It’s the difference between the quality of a life worth living, and not,” says Ginger Rutland, the bride’s mother. “My husband’s stroke was massive, and he wasn’t supposed to live. What they’ve done is nothing short of amazing.”

Eva occasionally practiced the father-daughter dance with her dad, who generally uses a wheelchair or a walker to get around. She was content to have him cling to her and sway to the song he chose for the occasion: Willie Nelson’s “Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys.”

But Emily Johnson and Chelsea McCormack, the PT grad students working with him this summer, had other ideas. “By the time of the wedding,” McCormack said in late June, “we want to get him to move in a circle. Our goal is get him safely down the aisle and dancing with his daughter.” They challenged him to quietly lower himself – “and not plop” – onto the church pew. They had him practice with a dining chair.
Fields memorized his reception toast and practiced it repeatedly with grad students Patti Osterholm and Hillary Vigil at Sacramento State’s Mary jane Rees Language, Speech and Hearing Center.

His speech therapy work will continue this fall at the Rees Center, which offers to the public an assortment of fee-based services performed by supervised graduate students. Eva’s attempt to get her father into Sac State’s free PT Mock Clinic came too late in the Spring 2013 semester, so the clinic’s director, Dr. Michael McKeough, emailed students, asking if anyone would work independently with Fields at his home. The family pays the students a small stipend.

“It’s amazing to get this experience. I’d do it for nothing,” Johnson says.

All of the student therapists – including Casey Mokres, Elaine Gardner and Esther “Teia” Jung from Physical Therapy, and Emalee Sharp and Hayden Zenk from Speech Pathology – were invited to the wedding.

“Emalee was Dad’s first speech therapist,” Eva said. “She got him to understand that no one could understand him and that he had interesting things to say, so that he should work at being understood.”

Before his stroke July 28, 2010, Fields ran a successful public relations firm, pitching political agendas to the media. His wife, an associate editor at the Sacramento Bee, had just finished chemotherapy after undergoing a mastectomy. And Eva, a 2008 graduate of Reed College, had quit her job at the State Capitol to travel abroad but put her plans on hold to care for her father during his recovery.

Eva met her fiancé, a computer engineer at Intel, soon after her father’s release from the hospital. Along with the usual linens and cookware listed on their wedding gift registry, the couple offered well-wishers the opportunity to donate to Sac State’s Physical Therapy and Speech Pathology programs.

“Sacramento State has the most wonderful people in its rehabilitation programs,” Eva said shortly before the wedding. “One thing I appreciate is that they treat Dad like a human being and not a patient. I can’t believe how lucky I am. I have my daddy back. I told him I wouldn’t get engaged until he could walk me down the aisle.”

A few weeks after becoming Mrs. Brent Schwartz, Eva shared exciting news from her wedding day: “Dad did EVERYTHING we wanted him to do. We did not even need the cue cards for his speech, because everyone could understand him. We never could have done it without Sac State, and all his therapists came to our wedding. It was a magical day.”

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