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9-year-old boy from Gillette recovers from brain trauma after hay ride accident



David Gard/New Jersey Local News Service Jacob George is a 9-year-old boy who is recovering from serious brain trauma from a fall from a hay ride. His family is having a fundraiser to help with medical costs. Jaya and George work with Jacob on a toy DJ station to develop his motor skills. "Squeeze your lips, Jacob."

In the basement of his Gillette home, George Avirappattu watched his 9-year-old son, Jacob George, struggle to blow into a plastic whistle. His wife, Jaya George, and a personal care assistant coaxed the boy to press his lips around the whistle to make a sound, stroking his face and occasionally holding open

his eyes.

After a few minutes of coaxing, the boy — held upright in a contraption called a stander — Jaya and the assistant stop, moving on to another task on a page-long list of physical therapy exercises.

It is like this every weekday, George said, although Jacob rarely makes it through the entire list.

Before October 2008, Jacob was a 7-year-old who played second base, took piano lessons and changed the station when his dad played public radio in the car.

He was "squeezed in the middle" between his brothers Davis and Daniel, now 13 and 5, George said.

On Oct. 24, 2008, at a family event at the Shrine of St. Joseph in Stirling, Jacob was riding in a hay ride fashioned out of a flatbed trailer, said Dominick Guerrini, an attorney with the Philadelphia law firm Kline and Specter. The rails on the trailer were low, Guerrini said, and Jacob toppled over the railings and fell on the ground. His head was crushed by the trailer.

"The first thing was disbelief," Avirappattu said. "Your heart stops."

After the fall, Jacob spent three weeks in intensive care at Morristown Memorial Hospital. The traumatic brain injury has left him classified as blind, mute and quadriplegic.

The past 17 months have been a series of hospitals, specialists and adjusting to a new life with a son that requires around-the-clock care. Jacob spent seven weeks at a rehabilitation institute in Baltimore, where he began to be able to open his eyes, make sounds and engage some of his muscles. Still, he has trouble smiling and controlling his tongue. He cannot speak.

"He listens," George said. "The spirit is there."

Besides school for children with cerebral palsy in Edison, the only place Jacob's parents take him is church. Avirappattu, a math professor at Kean University who describes himself as spiritual, said he prefers things to be logical in his life. But since the accident, he said, "there's no (other) place to turn."

As it happens, much of Jacob's treatment has been covered by insurance through Avirappattu's job. But as the boy has begun his recovery, Avirappattu said, more and more of Jacob's treatment is no longer considered a medical necessity. He and his wife fear less for Jacob's immediate care than for Jacob's long-term future.

"We haven't really started putting numbers together," Avirappattu said.

A fundraiser Sunday at Berkeley Plaza in Berkeley Heights, organized by members of the church community, will help pay for Jacob's ongoing care, as well as raise awareness for brain injury. There is also litigation against the Shrine of St. Joseph and the driver of the hayride to help fund Jacob's future needs. Research into

treating traumatic brain injury is still in its early stages, and although there has been progress in alternative treatments like stem cell therapy, they are not covered under Jacob's insurance. "The future is uncertain. We don't know where we are going," George said.

In the near future, the family intends to sell its house in Gillette, where wheeling 80-pound Jacob up and down a steep driveway is difficult and dangerous.

Recently, Avirappattu said, he was cleaning out the house and came upon a wooden house Jacob had built, a rough foot-tall structure that the boy had rigged with a light and switch bought from Radio Shack. Avirappattu said he was set to throw it out, but a family friend stopped him.

"She said, 'Keep that. He's going to keep working on that someday.'"