

“I Wanted My Life

AS YOU READ • Think about what helped Nick heal.

On a cold day in early 2011, Nick Ventura, then 13, opened his eyes in a hospital bed. He had no idea where he was. He opened his mouth, but he could not speak. He had lost the ability to walk. He couldn't imagine why he was in this hospital. The last thing he remembered was being on his beloved snowboard, speeding down a mountain in upstate New York.

Something terrible had happened - that much Nick knew. He had a sense that the life he knew was gone. Now he wondered, would he ever get up back

An Easy Run

A few weeks earlier, Nick had been a happy middle schooler with lots of friends and a passion for sports, especially snowboarding. For Nick, nothing was more exhilarating than flying down a hill on his board. And that's just what he was doing on a bright February day in 2011.

He'd gone with his friends to Holimont ski resort, a few hours from his home in Ohio. The sky was blue, the snow soft, and the air pleasantly crisp. Nick hopped on his board and sailed down the side of the mountain, feeling invincible.

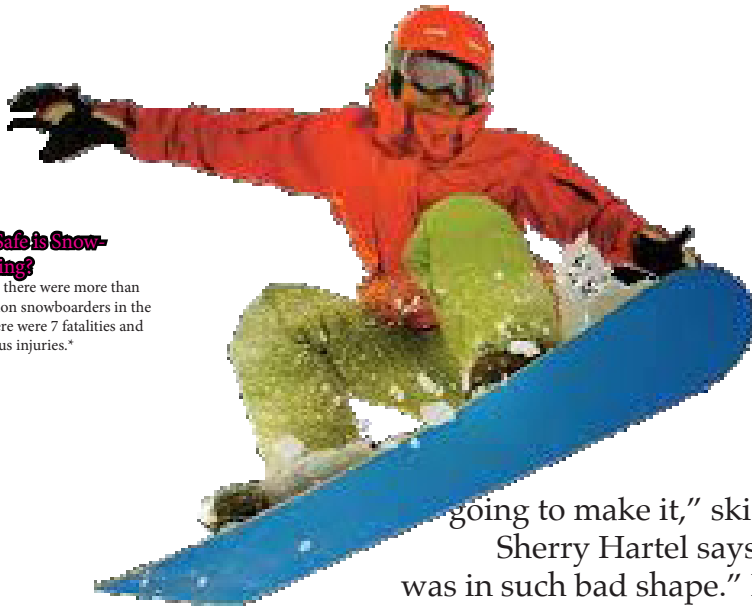
It was an easy run for him. But then something went wrong. No one was sure exactly what happened, but Nick's board likely got tripped up in the snow. He fell to the ground, hitting his head. Now unconscious, he went tumbling off the trail-picking up speed-until he slammed into a tree.

A snowboarding accident left 13-year-old Nick Ventura unable to talk or walk. That would not be the end of his story

By KRISTEN LEWIS

Seconds ticked by.
Nick did not wake up.

His friends wondered what had happened. They had all started the run together, then Nick had seemed to vanish. They had no idea that he was alone-and gravely hurt.



How Safe is Snowboarding?

In 2015, there were more than 4.3 million snowboarders in the U.S. There were 7 fatalities and 14 serious injuries.*

Critical Injuries

Mark Schultz, a senior ski patroller, heard someone shouting that a snowboarder was in trouble. A high school principle and volunteer firefighter, Schultz sprang to action. As his fellow patrollers raced into the woods, Schultz went to get oxygen, then headed into the woods himself.

Within a minute of the crash, the patrol team had found Nick and were working to save his life.

Schultz knew that Nick's injuries were critical; Nick's rattling breath was an indicator that death was near. Schultz gave Nick oxygen while the others loaded him into a toboggan and carefully pulled him down the hill to the patrol center, where injured skiers and snowboarders can be assisted.

Nobody knew who this critically injured boy was—Nick wasn't carrying an ID—but they did know he needed to get to the hospital immediately. "None of us thought he was

going to make it," ski patroller Sherry Hartel says. "He was in such bad shape." High winds made it

impossible to transport Nick to the hospital by helicopter. He would have to be taken by ambulance, which would take an agonizing 45 minutes.

As they sped away to the nearest emergency room, Nick's condition continued to **deteriorate**.

In Danger

By this point, the patrol team back at HoliMont had made a call on Nick's phone to the contact marked "Dad." Nick's parents, Brian and Patty Ventura, were in Cleveland, where the family lived. They had no idea that their son's snowboarding trip had gone terribly wrong. They were grocery shopping when they got the call: Their son had been in an accident; he was in the hospital, and he was fighting for his life.

Brian and Patty dropped everything and ran to their car. It should have been a three-hour drive to the hospital in Buffalo, New York. But snowstorms that day would make the trip longer. Brian and Patty set off, not knowing if they would ever see their

son alive again.

The Wait

At the Women's and Children's Hospital of Buffalo, Nick was rushed into surgery. His skull was fractured, and he had contusions, or bruises, on his brain. The force of the crash had slammed his brain forward and backward against his skull with enormous force, causing a traumatic brain injury, or TBI. These injuries are invisible from the outside—but they are incredibly serious.

Your brain controls every aspect of your body. It tells your heart to beat and your stomach to digest the sandwich you ate for lunch. It tells your body to walk, talk, and dance.

To accomplish these amazing **feats**, your brain uses chemicals and electrical impulses to communicate with the rest of your body.

Basically, the brain is like your body's computer. In Nick's case, it was as if someone had disconnected every wire in his head.

Nick's doctors did all they could. They gave him powerful medicines that put him into a coma. This would let his brain rest and begin to heal.

Nick's doctors did not know if he would survive. But it was good that Nick had been wearing his helmet. Without it, he almost certainly would have died in the snow.

Weeks passed, and Nick's parents remained at his side. Then-at last-came the moment when Nick opened his eyes.

Road to Recovery

Nick had no memory of the accident or how he got to the hospital. The last thing he remembered was snowboarding at HoliMont. Now he could not walk and he could barely speak. He didn't even remember the name of his best friend.

Nick faced a long and uncertain road to recovery.

Six weeks after the accident, Nick was moved to Cleveland Clinic Children's, a hospital in Cleveland. Instead of spending his days at school, Nick spent his days in rehabilitation. An occupational therapist helped him relearn how to do everyday tasks - from holding a pencil to getting up from a chair. A physical therapist helped him learn to walk again. A speech therapist worked with him to regain language. In June, though, his vocabulary remained limited to about five words.

"The hardest part was relearning how to talk," Nick says. "Speech is so natural, but the second you lose it, you don't know what to do."

He had good days and bad days. Sometimes Nick would get frustrated if he wasn't making progress quickly enough.

"Being in the hospital was torture," he says. "This was not the life I wanted to live."

But ask anyone close to Nick and they will tell you he is nothing if not determined. "He never stops fighting," says ski patroller Hartel, who has gotten to know Nick since helping treat him at HoliMont. "He has that strong spirit that keeps moving forward. No matter what roadblock he ends up coming across in his life, he finds a way around it"

Not everyone who sustains an injury as serious as Nick's gets better - but Nick was fortunate. Day by grueling day, he was improving.

"You Can Do This"

While Nick was in the hospital, he realized that what he wanted more than anything more than anything was to snowboard again.

"I loved being on the slopes," Nick says. "It felt like home."

Getting on a snowboard might seem like a preposterous goal for someone in his condition, but to Nick it made perfect sense. "I say my life before, and I wanted my life back," Nick says. "So I just worked toward that."

Nick was finally able to leave the hospital in June, though he would need therapy for the next few years. In the fall, he returned to eighth grade at Lakewood Catholic Academy.

Going to school all day and spending his evenings doing two hours of therapy on top of homework took all his



One Year After

In Februar 2012, one year after his accident, Nick once again stood in teh snow at HoliMont Ski Resort. He held the snowboard from his crash. Friends, family, and members of the ski patrol team that rescued him gathered around him. Watching Nick move with confidence and ease, they could hardly believe that just one year ago he was fighting for his life.

Nick felt no fear as he sailed down the snow on his snowboard.

“Everything just fell into place,” he remembers.

Looking Ahead

Today, Nick is completing his first year at St. Bonaventure University in New York. He is majoring in education, and he hopes to become a teacher and travel the world.

With his family, Nick started the 11 Foundation, which offers support and information to families that have children with TBIs. Through the organization, Nick shares his story and talks about the importance of wearing a helmet.

Since the accident, Schultz has become close with Nick and his family. “This is a young man who had to relearn to walk, talk and function,” says Schultz. “And he did it with grace, drive, and with just work.”

As for Nick?

He still snowboards whenever he can.

And he has a special message for you: “Don’t ever give up. There is always another

day.’ energy. But he had support from his friends, teachers, and family.

“They were behind me the whole time, giving me encouragement,” Nick says. “My mom owns a cheerleading gym, so I had her cheerleaders behind me as well, saying, ‘Go Nick! You can do this.’”