

#overwhelmedandoverjoyed

o-ver·whelm / ˌōvər'(h)welm/; past tense: overwhelmed

to defeat completely or to give too much of a thing to (someone); inundate.

o-ver·joy /oh-ver-joi/; past tense: overjoyed

to cause to feel great joy or delight; elate

“Hello...Hello...” “Heather...? Are you there?” (Kids faintly screaming in the background.) The phone disconnected.

“Hello...” “Are you there?” Justin could still hear the kids screaming. The spotty phone service would not allow them to connect for very long.

On that day, September 15, 2020, from the start, it was different. Prior to this day, we liked to think we were just your average hard-working family. We strive to be active parents in our school and community while raising four boys and a little girl: Cash (11), Myles (9), Kipp (6), Scout (4), and Dax (1). But again, this day was different in an overwhelming way.

That morning, it was a challenge to work out the day’s logistics. Myles’ class had just been quarantined due to COVID-19 exposure and she would need to stay with Mom-mom and baby Dax. Heather, a teacher, dropped off the other kids at school and later, Justin, the Houston high school principal, would drive a bus to the volleyball game in our hometown of Plato. Cash had football practice at 5:00 p.m. Heather thought she would have just enough time after school, and before practice, to make the 30-minute trip home to pick up the kids and take Cash to practice in Houston.

Cash’s practice ended just after 7:00 p.m. and soon, Heather and the kids, content with a movie, were homeward bound. Heather remembers an overwhelming sense of calm as she drove. Quickly, her feeling changed as she approached a curve on Highway 32 and saw a flash of lights at a high rate of speed coming right at her—the van was hit, head on.

Heather was conscious and the kids were crying and screaming as she tried to turn and look back at them. She could see Scout, Kipp and Myles’ scared little faces and heard Dax crying directly behind her. Heather reached for her phone that ironically never left the console and called Justin, while yelling for help. The air bags had all deployed, covering the windows and locking all the doors. It was dark and they were trapped. Justin never answered so Heather called a second time. She had an overwhelming panic she had not heard or seen Cash. By this time Myles had already unbuckled and was at Heather’s shoulder. Heather yelled out to Cash. Myles walked back to him and turned to Heather with an expression on her face and a scared voice that is unforgettable.

“Mom! Call 911!” Heather dialed 911 for the first time in her life. As she answered the questions from 911, she tried to get to Cash. The steering wheel and dash were up against her body and she could barely move. Instinct adrenaline set in and she managed to wiggle herself out and get to the third row where Cash was sitting—an overwhelming sight she will never unsee. By this time Myles had already unbuckled Kipp, Dax and the top of Scout’s car seat. A couple and a young girl arrived on the scene. They were able to crack Heather’s driver door and

get the kids out. Heather was able to get next to Cash in the back row. He was slouched forward with his head drooped. His left eye was already the size of a baseball, there was blood all over his face. He would not respond to Heather and he was gurgling and moaning.

About that time, Justin headed home from the game. He received a couple of calls from Heather and all he heard was kids screaming in the background. Overwhelmed with emotion, he had high hopes Heather's van would be parked in its normal spot; however, when he pulled up, it wasn't there. He pulled his car near the garage, sat for about a second and knew something was not right. He decided to head towards Houston where he knew Heather and the kids would be coming back from Cash's football practice. Before leaving the driveway, he received a text alert from the local newspaper, "Traffic Alert: Motor Vehicle Accident on Highway 17 with Entrapment and Injury." After driving a few miles eastbound, he received a call from a 911 operator. "Your wife and children have been injured in a motor vehicle accident." He quickly interrupted and asked, "Is everyone O.K.?" She responded, "I can't tell you that...you will need to reach out to your wife to get an update."

Heather continued to follow directions from 911. As help arrived, she called Justin. The first call dropped and the second was short as Justin was close to the scene. About that time, an emergency responder yelled out there was a major fuel leak and everyone needed to get out of the vehicle immediately. Heather went to the shoulder of the road where a young teenage girl, a previous student of Justin's, and the couple that had arrived on scene first sat with our four other children and Heather. Medical personnel and first responders were all rushing around. It was just like a movie scene. Vehicles were backed up for as far as you could see in both directions.

Emergency personnel transitioned Cash from the van to the ambulance. A helicopter landed up the hill on a field. After what seemed like a lifetime, a paramedic stuck her head out of the ambulance and said, "We are not flying!" She made the last-minute call to not fly Cash to Springfield but transport him to Fort Leonard Wood as he was not stable. Justin's brother drove him to Fort Leonard Wood as Heather and the other kids were taken by ambulance to Texas County Memorial Hospital. After being admitted, Kipp was discovered to have a brain bleed and was flown to Mercy Hospital in Springfield. After Cash was stabilized, he was also flown by helicopter to Mercy. While in the hospital with the four kids, Heather also received medical attention for a broken foot.

Myles, Scout, and Dax were eventually released to go home with mild/moderate injuries. Kipp received treatment throughout the night and many days later as he suffered a traumatic brain injury with a brain bleed, a clavicle break, and a pulmonary contusion.

For those first 24 hours, Cash had extensive surgery to the abdomen areas as his intestines and colon were severely damaged. He suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and a complete spinal cord injury (SCI) at his thoracic (T3 and T4) vertebrae. For many, many days, there was an overwhelming sense of uncertainty about Cash's prognosis and the Mercy medical team provided an amazing acute response to his needs.

Within the first days of being together, we cried out for prayers from family and community. We also made it clear from the start it was not too soon to have forgiveness in our hearts for the gentleman who caused the accident. At this point in our journey, we were **overwhelmed** and **overjoyed** at the same time. We had witnessed answered prayers, God signs, and angels on earth! Cash had a collapsed lung when we arrived. Less than 24 hours

later, his lung had expanded close to normal. We were overjoyed! Also, Cash made it through a very critical abdominal and intestinal surgery. Our minds started to clear from the initial shock of the accident and miracles became easily recognizable. Looking back, there was so much and so many to be thankful for: the young girl who was a previous student was the first on the scene to literally take the shirt off her back and cover our baby; the ambulance driver was also a previous student provided confidence and reassurance he would get Cash to the hospital safely, but in a hurry; the ambulance paramedic who was able to step in and recognize that Cash was not able to fly--the right people were all in the right places.

Furthermore, one of the most notable blessings, was the opportunity to take up residence in the Ronald McDonald House at Mercy—Room 104! In a time that was unstable, chaotic and scary, we found peace, we found grace, we found selflessness--IT WAS A BREATH OF FRESH AIR! It came at the most perfect time. And again, what we do know is we were granted a gift! A gift of safe harbor and home for 22 nights! While Cash was in such critical condition and Kipp was under care, Justin and Heather were bouncing back and forth, from room to room. One parent was encouraged to stay bedside, while the other one rested. Heather needed lots of rest as she endured reconstructive surgery on her foot.

And more than rest, sometimes it just gave us a private and quiet place to cry, to laugh, to love, and to recharge for the next shift. The Ronald McDonald House provided so much more than a place to sleep. And, on the daily, we did our best to thank the gracious, loving, and accommodating staff. It was clearly understood they were not looking for thanks. It was evident on day one just as it was on day 22, the Ronald McDonald House was there to provide the safe harbor of hope for us as an entire family.

We remember checking into the Ronald McDonald House. The program manager visited with us and provided us with all the information and gave us a tour of the facility. The blessings overjoyed us! As he showed us our room, we could not help but notice the beautiful artwork on the wall outside of the room. It was magnificent. And what seemed to be the biggest blessing of all, if you looked closely, you could see the name of the artist etched in the canvas--CASH. We were overwhelmed and overjoyed! It was, again, one of those moments that we knew we were in the right place. Come to find out, the artist was a kid from our local community of Houston who had been a patient at Mercy Hospital and stayed in the Ronald McDonald House.

We felt part of the Ronald McDonald House family immediately. We never had to think about dinner, laundry, or any day-to-day need. The generous staff delivered a wonderful meal each evening that was graciously donated by a host of organizations and people. Every night as we entered the house, the staff would kindly greet us and ask, "Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?" We were treated like family. As we were there for 22 days, we had to do laundry. I can remember being so exhausted one night and trying to switch out laundry. As I entered the laundry room, I noticed that, not only had someone switched out our laundry, but they had dried it and folded in and placed it so neatly on the counter.

On those days and on many days after, the Ronald McDonald House was there—they are there! The staff put their lives on hold for a minute to be with us, to check on us daily, to support us, to make us laugh, to cry with us, to be quiet with us, to feed us, to educate us, to learn with us, to sit with us, to build with us, to support, to..., to..., to... and for that we are so thankful.

An update as of today, Cash suffered multiple injuries; however, there are a few that will impact his life forever. He suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and a complete Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) at his Thoracic (T3 and T4) Vertebrae. While he was in Mercy Hospital he had a spinal fusion from vertebrae T2 to T5. Additionally, he had major injury to his small and large intestines. Cash has completed his second round of inpatient care at Ranken Jordan Pediatric Bridge Hospital where he was admitted for intensive therapies. In February of 2021, Cash was able to start back at Houston Elementary with his other siblings, where he is excited to be back with his peers. We would say, with a lot of certainty, you would be hard pressed to find a kid as motivated and optimistic as Cash. Within days of returning home, he was quick to let us know that his anthem song is, "Say I Won't" by MercyMe. And--so far, he lives that way!

He is joined by a strong band of siblings and mom who are also healing. Dax will be turning two in June and has been quite the helper and very adaptive to the rush of the last eight months. Scout (4) suffered a broken bone and dental injuries and continues to talk about the wreck on a daily basis. Kipp (6) suffered a TBI, broken bone, and severe whiplash and is continuing to work through the recovery of a TBI. Myles (9) suffered major burns from the seatbelt but has recovered quickly. In the midst of change, challenge, and chaos, Myles has stepped up and been a huge big sister--and boss (leader)! Heather is also on the mend. Her foot continues to be in a healing state. Like our kids, she has been resilient in her recovery--at the same time--ALWAYS, putting the recovery of our kids as her first priority. Heather has returned back to teaching kindergartners at Houston Elementary.

The tragic accident on September 15, 2020, is not our story. Our story, the story of being #overwhelmedandoverjoyed started moments after! Acts of kindness are a real thing! Forgiveness is a real thing! And, in this season--with no expectation, our family reaped "the harvest" from many people. This started within the first few minutes of our journey as a young teenage girl, who gave the shirt off her back (literally), sat on the side of the road comforting four of our five kids. As the minutes, hours, and days went by, the blessings continued in full force from the Ronald McDonald House! Most of which left us speechless and otherwise #overwhelmedandoverjoyed. We look forward to the days ahead--to live, to love, and to give back--overabundantly!