

Ken Smith was dead July 2, 2005, shortly after he jumped his motorcycle 70 feet and crashed into an embankment. Life left him only briefly as his heart stopped beating and his lungs lay flat, until his younger brother reached over the wall that separates life and death and pulled him back.

It is amazing that Ken, who will turn 40 this year, suffered only one permanent injury that day at his motocross track in Whiteville, when his body slammed into the packed dirt at 40 mph, but it is tragic that the small injury was to his spinal cord between his first and second vertebrae, making him a quadriplegic. The wreck and Ken's recovery have put the Smith family on an odyssey of the greatest challenge of their lives.

Listen to motocross riders talk about their sport and you would think it was a drug.

"Nothing got my adrenaline pumping like getting on my motocross bike and taking a track with competition," Ken says. The pull of that adrenaline was like an addiction that, even into his late 30s, Ken couldn't shake.

"It still makes me shiver when I watch it," Ken says. "It makes me want to get back on it again." That he was even on a motorcycle last year is amazing, as he had fallen enough times to break both collarbones and a pair of ribs and crack his scapulae. "It was a hard sport to lay it down," he says. "It's an exciting sport, it's a challenging sport – it's a dangerous sport."

Ken has a clear goal to walk someday – to rise from his wheelchair on his own two feet. This is a long-term goal, as today he is struggling to move his hands a few inches.

#### The kick-start

Ken was born in Elizabethtown to David Jr. and Jayne Smith, delivered, as were his brothers and sister, by his grandfather, Dr. E.C. Bennett. "My parents have been good parents," he says, "and all the things we did as children a lot of children don't get to do. One thing that they did, is make us to not give up, to work hard and be strong."

Jayne, a fifth-grade teacher at Edgewood School, wears a bracelet on her right wrist with an inscription; "One Day at a Time," a credo that she says has kept her going for the past 362 days. She is not the kind of mother who would overprotect her children, and she enjoyed watching them race.

"I was right there with them," she says. "I wasn't going to be left at home." Like all the Smiths, Jayne is looking to God for guidance. "I think this has exposed us to what life is supposed to be about," she says, "and that it's not our will – it's God's will. I know emphatically that this is for a purpose, whether it is for setting an example for other kids on what they can accomplish, or to help our family focus on the more important things in life."

Dave Smith is retired from a 37-year career in education.

"It's tough seeing Ken lying in there, knowing how active he was," Dave says. "I try not to let this take me over – you keep your mind occupied. We all hope and pray that he'll beat this thing and get up and walk. I was hoping it'd be quicker than a year... in a few months, maybe he'd be moving around."

The motocross bug bit Ken and his brothers in the 1970s, and each year they rode bigger and faster bikes. While his brothers let the bug go in their college years, Ken built his life around it.

"It's been a dream of mine all my life to own a motorcycle franchise," Ken says. He took up welding to pay the bills and spent his spare time and money chasing the adrenaline rush. The ambition and drive that got Ken into trouble may be his only way out. His sister, Marjorie Simmons, describes some of his qualities.

"I love Kenny because he's so free spirited," she says. "He's a people person who thrives off his friends and family. I feel happy when I'm with him. He's not a serious person – I think that has helped in this situation. He's a hard worker and independent – if there was anything to be done, he'd do it himself.

"Kenny has a strong personality," she says. "He beats to a different drummer." Jayne agrees.

"He is my number-one son. It's the emotion that's always been there, from being my first born, and from other things.



Ken and David Smith in the early years.

"He always signed his cards to me; 'From your #1 son.'"

The Tabletop is one of the most difficult motocross jumps to master, and Ken had mastered it many times. When you jump the Tabletop, you are much like a cat leaping onto a chair and then onto a table.

"Two minutes." Ken is balancing at the side of his bed, his stiff arms propping him up. Physical Therapist Kim Conner is crouched at his knees.

"Two minutes, fifteen seconds," announces Trevor, a physical therapist trainee who is timing this test. Kim hopes Ken can balance longer than he did last week when he lasted for just under three minutes.

Every bit of progress is progress. Also today, Ken will try to move each hand an inch or two, straighten a foot, flex his fingers...

"Two minutes, forty-five seconds." Nervous smiles fill the room. Kim cheers Ken on.

The task is so challenging that Ken is silent – this takes all his concentration.

Seconds pass and Ken strains to support himself, his eyes fixed straight ahead. Kim takes a deep breath...

"Three minutes!" Kim cheers and laughs and Ken smiles broadly. She leans forward as he begins to fall and she grabs him.

"You did it!" She holds his shoulders and smiles fill the room.

Our lungs work involuntarily, even while we sleep. Ken still has this advantage over the late Christopher Reeve, whose case is a benchmark in the spinal cord injury world.

Reeve had to breathe as a conscious act, and when he slept, a ventilator operated his lungs. Ken has the unconscious impulse to breathe, but pulling air into his lungs is deliberate. He labors on each breath, pausing his speech, bringing his chin down slightly and drawing air into his lungs.

#### Shifting gears

Ken and his brother David III opened a motorcycle shop in downtown Whiteville in the 1990s. David soon pursued teaching, and Ken partnered with Charles Holden at the current location off J.K. Powell Blvd. where they acquired a Suzuki franchise. Ken is no longer affiliated with the business.

To reach his goal of riding professionally, Ken attempted to race in the Supercross in Charlotte in the late 1990s, but a small injury kept him off the track. He was married for a few years and he nearly remarried a few years ago. Not that motorcycles affected his relationships, but he could always find a

shack and access tunnel.

"There wasn't a day since I started my business that I didn't enjoy getting up and going to work," Ken says. His location on a route to the beach was good, and by the summer of 2005 "We were just starting to get ahead."

Marjorie can remember a crash Ken had two weeks before his near fatal one. Ken jumped the Tabletop and came up short. He hit the dirt and tumbled down the ramp "like a rag doll," she says. Ken walked off, with bent handlebars and a sore shoulder.

"It seems like it was yesterday," she says. "I replay that scene and I try to put something in there to make it different, but it doesn't work."

#### The jump

Ken Smith went to his track on the Fourth of July weekend last



Ken enjoys a rare moment of sunshine in the backyard of the Smith family home in Whiteville.

year. Friends joined him and his brother and nephews for some fun in the dirt. "It was pretty that day," he says.

When he refers to the wreck that turned July 2, 2005 into the "9/11" of his life, he refers to it as; "My accident," and he discusses it without emotion, as if he is taking on the challenges of his future by first coming to terms with his past.

The Tabletop is two jumps. You can take them both slowly, or you can tear up and over that first one at 50 mph and fly the length of two school buses to the top of the next one.

"That's the thing about motocross," Ken says. "It's the timing and knowing the track, knowing what gear to be in. I was in the right gear, I just wasn't going fast enough – I needed that throttle turned a little bit more."

Three decades of adrenaline-fueled passion sailed 70 feet through the air, slammed into a wall of dirt and tumbled down the ramp into the cold, firm hands of fate. Ken's brother and friends ran toward his motionless body and signaled

oncoming riders to stop. Ken had blacked out.

Panic hit the track. Riders dropped their bikes and ran over. His brother, David, ran to Ken's side.

"Get his helmet off!" someone shouted. Ken's helmet face bar was cracked and mangled. David knew he shouldn't move a victim in this situation, but his brother wasn't breathing and was turning blue, and with that helmet on they couldn't revive him. David reached down to his older brother.

"I remember my hands shaking," he says.

Cell phones opened, 911 operators answered. Whiteville Rescue responded.

Someone steadied Ken's head while another removed his helmet. They rolled him from his side onto his back and David began rescue breathing for his brother.

"He got a couple of breaths," David says, "and his color changed – his color came back real good."

David continued breathing for Ken as the group's pretty day at the track plunged into horror, and

traffic on Washington Street was flooded in red lights and wailing sirens.

Those who saw the wreck knew that this one was bad. Anything is possible, but when you see a man crash into a clay bank at 40 mph, you hope for the possible and you pray for the impossible. A half-dozen motorcycles, their red-hot engines quiet, surrounded a dozen people, their hearts pounding like crazy as they held and prayed for Ken, who had just taken the last motorcycle jump of his life.

Paramedic Stacy Ganus remembers the rescue call clearly.

"This was one of those big calls that you never forget," Ganus says. "When we got there, his brother was doing an excellent job of breathing for him – it was the best thing anyone could have done."

Ganus and Paramedic Buddy Walley and his wife, EMT-Intermediate Sonya Walley evaluated Ken; no broken bones, no bleeding, rapid pulse...

They put a bag mask on him to help him breathe while they immobilized him on a spine board.

"The crash cut his respiratory drive out," Ganus says, meaning that Ken could breathe, but the nerve that helped tell him to breathe was damaged.

"I remember them trying to get my mouth open to get an oxygen tube in me," Ken says. He instinctively fought back. "I kept gritting my teeth. Then I opened my mouth and they shoved the tube down my throat and I calmed down."

At the hospital, Chief of Staff Dr. Ronald Walters and the emergency room team began to stabilize and analyze Ken's condition. Walters' examination revealed a severe upper spinal cord injury, and X-rays and CAT scans showed clearly that the first and second bones in Ken's neck, the cervical vertebrae, were broken.

This meant that Ken would need a neurosurgeon, which meant he would have to travel to Wilmington. Other scans revealed no significant injuries in his abdomen and no bleeding in his brain.

"That was a relief," Walters says, because it meant that Ken could be transported right away. The team

stabilized him and called for a helicopter.

Dr. Ronald Walters is a surgeon who, through his work and heritage, is a part of the backbone of Columbus County medicine. His father was a surgeon here and Ron has kept his roots in Whiteville, living a short walk from the hospital and his practice off Jefferson Street, and treating generations of families. He and the Smiths go way back.

"Ken's dad was my coach," Walters says. "I've been their family surgeon for years." Lying on a white sheet in front of him was a tragedy that would cut deep into the community he loved. The situation wasn't good, but Walters knew it could have been much worse.

"His helmet saved him..." Walters said. "It saved him from serious brain injury."

On her way out of the hospital, Ganus passed by Ken, who was lying on his back with wires and tubes leading into and out of him. His head was swollen from the crash, but he was awake – and he was still Ken.

"I knew that he couldn't talk," Ganus says. "But he looked at us and I could see that he mouthed; 'Thank you.'"

Ken's mother, father and sister were at home that afternoon when the telephone rang.

"It was [David's wife] Susan," Marjorie remembers. "She said; 'Meet us at the hospital. Ken has been hurt real bad.' Within an hour he was airlifted to Wilmington."

"We drove to Wilmington that day, and then pretty much back and forth for the next few weeks." Ken spent a month at New Hanover Regional Medical Center breathing through a mechanical ventilator, and then went to a facility in Rocky Mount.

#### The landing

The pain was not the worst thing for Ken. What hurt most was waking up to the nightmare that was his reality.

"When I came to and I knew that I had major problems," Ken says, "I started worrying about everything; my businesses and my living situation." For the first time in his life he

had no control. "What was it going to be like?" he thought. "What was I going to be able to do?"

David and his wife, Susan, picked up the pieces of Ken's financial life. They shut down his fabrication shop and transferred ownership of the motorcycle business to Ken's partner.

"I don't know what people would do if they don't have family," David says. "I guess they'd go in an institution or a nursing home or something. Ken's very lucky to have family and friends that are close by."

Ken was scheduled for important rehabilitation in Atlanta, and the bills were piling up higher than the insurance could reach – expenses during the first year after a spinal cord injury can exceed a half-million dollars. Friends and the community pitched in.

Joe Olsen and David Stevens organized a barbecue fundraiser in front of the motorcycle shop. They pitched a tent, brought in cookers, set up tables and on a rainy morning in early August, they hoped for the best.

People showed up by the hundreds, offering their help and concern and cash. The sun came out as the barbecue flowed. They ran out of plates twice.

"I reckon you know who your true-blue friends are," Ken says, "when they do things like that for people."

Marjorie caught the day on video and took it to Ken's bedside to show him the support he had. Watching that video, Ken remembers, was a major highlight in his healing process. Later that month, girls in his neighborhood held a bake sale, and his church, Whiteville United Methodist, raised money. All these little drops in a big bucket meant a great deal to Ken.

"The support that we have gotten from the community, the cards, the phone calls..." Jayne says. "I was astonished each day. In Wilmington, there were 30 people in the halls for him. They came out of the woodwork – there were people I hadn't seen in years and years."

If you have a loved one who is struggling for life and takes every breath through a ventilator, you want one thing for that person: to improve in health and breathe on

their own. The device invades your mouth and neck and forces air into your lungs. You can't talk, you can't laugh.

"Ken fought the ventilator," Marjorie says. "He didn't like it at all, and when he came off the ventilator, that was the best day."

It was such a good day that, on Labor Day weekend, the family drove to Shepherd Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Center in Atlanta. They had a message to deliver.

"We let him know that we weren't giving up," Marjorie says, "and we would be behind him one hundred percent."

Then it was his turn. "We let him talk. He talked

***"He told us that he wasn't going to live his life like this, and how he wasn't going to be a burden. We told him that the Lord was with us and we had a job to do."***

about how it sucked and it was hard," Marjorie says, "and I just stood there crying." Ken labored through each word with a deflated ventilator cuff around his neck, but the family visit and show of support did him a world of good.

"He had been very down that day," Marjorie says. "But by that night he was laughing – his whole disposition changed. He told us that he wasn't going to live his life like this, and how he wasn't going to be a burden. We told him that the Lord was with us and we had a job to do."

Shepherd, a haven for spinal cord injury victims, was founded in 1975 by the family of James Shepherd, who was injured in a surfing accident in Brazil. The staff kept Ken busy with physical therapy and classes.

"It was a mentally, physically and

emotionally powerful place," Ken says. "They would drive and drive it into your mind to have a positive attitude. But there were a lot of kids there that it didn't work.

"That's the biggest thing – that right attitude and people supporting you," Ken says. "That's what keeps you going."

#### The track ahead

Ken's father built a wheelchair ramp in the back of their home and prepared an empty bedroom for him. During the first few months he was home, his brothers and sister took turns staying the night with Ken, sleeping next to his bed on a borrowed cot.

These days, his room is busy with visitors. The phone rings again, a call from family friend Henrietta Todd. He talks to her through a speakerphone.

"I don't need to tell you this, Kenny, but a lot of people love you and keep you in prayer," she says.

"It makes you appreciate a small town and knowing people," Ken says afterward. "If I was in a big town like Atlanta, I'd be just another name and number."

"The Lord's got a lot to do with it. I keep saying my prayers and hoping it'll come through and I'll be able to move around." He says that the people at his church have been very helpful, as are his friends. "It has been wonderful to have them."

"It's tough when you're 39 years old and you come back and move into your mom and dad's home," Ken says. "It changes everyone's lifestyle. Whether they say it or not, you feel like you're a burden. Everything I need to do I've got to ask someone to do it – I used to be the other way around."

"If my mom and dad were in bad health, I hope the Lord will bring me out of this situation so I'll be ready to take care of them."

Your spinal cord is about as big around as your thumb and contains thousands of nerves, or very, very thin wires. While scientists can see individual nerves, they can't tell one from the other, and when many are broken, we can't fix them.

There has been some success. Dr. Walters says, with repairing a few nerves on extremities, but very little in the spinal cord.

A nurse is with Ken throughout the day, paid for by Medicaid, but the family shares other chores. Jayne gets Ken up each morning and Chris and David take turns preparing him for sleep each night. Marjorie recently gave up her shift when she became pregnant.

Every evening, Ken's muscles and joints need to be flexed by someone stretching his arms, legs, hands and feet. Then, they'll replace his shirt with a gown, let him breathe humid air from a machine to avoid pneumonia, brush his teeth and give him medication.

Then it's time to prop him up. Ken will lie on his back all night, so he wears boots and hand splints that keep his feet and fingers straight. His bed sheet must be perfectly smooth, as creases could damage his skin. A set of pillows keeps him in position, the same position that Jayne will find him the next morning.

"It is what it is, but we're not going to stop everything and mope about it," David says. "Our family is a kind of 'suck it up, get it done, and do what you gotta do' family."

"He's come an awful long way and he doesn't complain. You just keep hoping and praying that things will get better for Kenny – you just don't know how much of it will come back."

Once unthinkable medical pursuits are now considered, such as stem cell research.

"Sometimes God gives you knowledge to do things," David says. "He's given us knowledge and if it's used right... When you're on the down side of it and you see how it can help people, you look at it differently."

Jayne believes her son's condition will improve.

"He doesn't like the word failure," she says. "I just know that if he can continue to get therapy he can get better. He's come a long way in the past year, and he's just determined to not let this thing whip him."

"They told my brother that he'd never walk again," Marjorie says. "But there's that possibility that he might, and I just want him to go somewhere that, if he doesn't walk

***See Family, page 15-A***



Physical Therapist Kim Conner flexes Ken's neck muscles. His mattress is liquid-filled and constantly changes areas of pressure to help avoid skin sores, one of the main causes of death for bedridden patients.





Conner stretches Ken's arms. Without flexing, Ken's muscles, skin and even bones will atrophy. "My chest, it feels like I'm in a full metal jacket," Ken says about the slight sensation he can feel. "It's like when your arm goes to sleep."

## Family

Continued from page 9-A

again, he'll be able to use his hands to use a wheelchair, wash himself... rub his own eye if he wants."

If, by some miracle, the possibility existed for Ken to be able to walk today, and ride a motorcycle even, would he do it?

"No, I think I'd watch," he says. "If the good Lord gave me another chance, I think I'd watch."

The greatest challenges reap rewards, and this has been a great challenge for the Smiths.

"This has made me more sensitive to handicapped and elderly people," Marjorie says. "When I see someone who is handicapped, it brings me joy to smile to them. There are times that I regret the way I used to be. I feel like I wasted a part of my life not being more sensitive, more caring." Marjorie has also become much closer to her brother. Before the wreck they met every two weeks or so, and now she sees him every day, and their relationship is deeper.

"Now, always when we say goodbye, he tells me he loves me and to be careful," she says. "He thanks me."

### The next race

Some of the Smith family's best times with Ken are when he is just Ken, when he is the free-spirited, ambitious brother they remember. David recalls a recent evening when they had him over for dinner.

David and Susan live next door in the yellow house that has been in the family for seven generations. They had pizza in the oven and the conversation was all about old times. They talked about high school and the crazy things that three brothers do. Laughter rose like spring flowers after a long winter.

"He would always razz on us," David says. "That night, one of our boys was giving him a hard time and he looked at him and said: 'Boy, when I get moving, I'm gonna jerk a knot in your butt!' We laughed so hard..."

"There's something good about us treating him like he's Kenneth."

The road that they call rehab is paved with psychology as much as physiology, and people on that road can tell you that the damage may be in their necks, but most of their recovery is in their heads.

Andy Cohn, one of the quadriplegic men documented in the



One of Ken's nurses, Rosemary Ford, shaves Ken's beard in the sunshine.



2005 movie "Murderball," tells how the sport of quad rugby, which is played in wheelchairs on a basketball court, helped him escape the depression that can further disable, and even kill, a quadriplegic.

"All quads believe they'll walk... the first year," Cohn said, relating how the major step in rehab is accepting your disabilities so you can thrive on your abilities.

Cohn discusses the process that took him from an ordinary disabled person with a future not nearly as promising as his past, to a Paralympics bronze medal winner in quad rugby and the subject of a documentary motion picture. He referred to it as his "resurrection."

Quad rugby is a very physical sport, and not all disabled people can excel at it, but when Cohn found something he could succeed in— and more importantly, develop a passion for — he was able to, at least spiritually, rise up out of his wheelchair.

When life-changing events like this occur, some friends and acquaintances drift away, and the ones who stay with you, stay for different reasons. Some stay because of what you had been to them, and some stay because of what you still are for them.

In his autobiography, Christopher Reeve said that early on in his rehabilitation he suggested to his wife; "Maybe we should let me go." Dana Reeve responded with words that Reeve later said "saved my life." She told him; "I'll be with you for the long haul, no matter what. You're still you and I love you."

Ken is still Ken, and what he offers his family, his friends and even the professionals who care for him are his free spirit and an indefatigable optimism, all balanced with a persistent struggle to work hard



Rosemary uses a cable-operated lift to move Ken from his bed to a wheelchair.

and be strong. He will spend the rest of his life working harder and being stronger than he ever has.

"I'm still looking for better things in life," Ken says. "But what I've got so far I can't complain a bit. The Lord's keeping me here for a purpose and I'm looking at it to be better than the first time."

For information on spinal cord injuries, visit this article at [Whiteville.com](http://Whiteville.com).



"Three minutes!" Ken struggles to keep himself upright, commanding what little control he has over his arms and legs as Physical Therapist Kim Conner guides him.