

The Journey Home is Finally Near

She dreams of everything that you would expect an 8½ year old girl to dream of. She is all jewelry, dresses and bows, and full of spunk.

A practical joker to anyone near her, watch out for her remote controlled 'gas' machine. If she gets you with it, she will giggle and ask, "What did you eat today?" Or maybe she will ask you to play Bean Boozle with her and you will be the unlucky one who gets the brown jelly bean that is either going to taste like chocolate pudding, or dog food—and know that you don't want the dog food taste! Moments like these with Reese Burdette tend to make you to forget you are in a hospital room in the Pediatrics Intensive Care Unit (PICU) in downtown Baltimore, Md.

Reese, the daughter of Justin and Claire Burdette, of Windy Knoll View, Mercersburg, Pa., is a vivacious and tenacious young lady. She has not allowed life's obstacles to get in her way as she has resided for the last 21 months in PICU at John Hopkins Children's Hospital.

Today, the Burdette family sees the light at the end of the tunnel and know that soon—most likely early this spring—Reese will be back making the journey down her farm lane (actually called Reese Way) to her beloved home near Mercersburg.

The Journey

On Memorial Day in 2014, Reese and her grandmother were injured in a house fire. The electrical fire broke out in the middle of the night at the home of Mike and Patricia Stiles, Waverly Farm, Clear Brook, Va.

Patricia remembers waking to 'popping and crackling' sounds and quickly woke Mike telling him to go get Brinkley, Reese's younger sister, and she would get Reese. As Patricia entered Reese's room, she realized the room was ground zero of the fire. She walked across the burning floor and made Reese jump to her and quickly got them out of the house and to what they hoped was safety. Little did they know their journey was just beginning due to the intense heat of the fire.

Patricia and Reese were transported im-

mediately to the local Winchester Hospital. Within a few hours, both had been airlifted to hospitals that could better treat the extensive nature of their injuries: Patricia to Washington Medical Burn Center and

breathing easier. She is looking at another more invasive surgery soon as her most recent one was not successful. She and Mike visit Reese weekly at the hospital, two hours away, and are ecstatic that she may be back home soon.

As for Reese, she qualifies as the poster child for hope, bravery, miracles and the saying that when life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Her road, like her grandmother's has not been easy.

John Hopkins Staff Rallies

In the early days at the hospital, Reese excelled and things were looking great for her to go home quickly. The roller coaster ride began just a week into her stay. Over the next five months, she would endure cardiac arrest several times, dozens of surgeries including an amputation of her lower left leg because of a clotting issue, and turning the medical world upside down as the staff tried new and innova-

tive practices to keep her alive. There were many times that the family rushed to her side to say their goodbyes, only to have a comatose seven-year-old defy the odds and prove that she was in this for the long fight.

"From the moment she began waking up from her coma and acknowledged to Justin that 'Pantene' was indeed her cow, we knew she was going to prove that miracles do happen," said Dr. Kristen Nelson of Reese.

Since that day, she has continued to have numerous firsts: sitting unsupported on a bench in November 2014, receiving her prosthetic leg in January 2015 and affectionately naming it Lego; and then her favorite Holstein cow, "Pantene," made a special visit to the hospital to surprise Reese in June 2015. She also was able to return to her classroom via a robot this past fall to continue her schoolwork with her classmates in Mercersburg.

Her robot, named Double, has a pink bow and Reese can maneuver it around her class room via her iPad in her room nearly two hours away. The robot allows her to interact with classmates and stay on top of her coursework.

This past summer she began a new



Justin, Claire and Brinkley Burdette are excited to know their family of four will soon be back together at their farm in Mercersburg, as Reese is making strides to be home later this spring. In May 2014, Reese suffered 35% burns to her body in a house fire that injured her and her grandmother, Patricia Stiles. Photo courtesy of Jennifer DiDio Photography.

Reese to Johns Hopkins Children's Hospital. Both were placed in comas to allow their lungs and burns to recover—Patricia for a month, Reese for four months. The pair both defied odds time and time again, showing the power of prayer and miracles allowing them to continue their lives.

Today, Patricia is back home in Clear Brook, and continuing to heal. She still suffers from scarring in her throat and has had two surgeries to remove part of her vocal cords to open up her airway to make



Patricia Stiles proudly shows off her new bag given to her by her grandchildren who affectionately call her "Mi Mi." She is a real-life hero to many after her rescue of Reese.



Reese has not skipped a beat with her school work. With remote access, she is able to interact daily with her classmates at her home school in Mercersburg through her iPad and a robot at her school called "Double."

venture from her hospital room—selling snow cones and popcorn to the staff—her goal, save her money to buy the things her mom wouldn't let her buy before when she returns to one of her favorite places, the All American in Louisville, Ky. "You know, the expensive things," she said.

It is obvious how much the staff at John Hopkins has come to love this beautiful young girl during her stay in PICU. As Reese rides her bike around the unit, she is stopped numerous times by hospital staff just wanting to say hi, or to give her a hug. Reese doesn't disappoint as she invites them to have a lollipop or a chocolate treat from her bicycle basket. She is the social butterfly of the floor as her hospital room is one that constantly buzzes with staff stopping in to say hello and chat with her.

Now that she can see her trip back home so close in the future, she is quick to ask each of them if they have an iPhone, and if they do, will they share their number with her so she can stay in touch when she gets home by texting or Facetime.

Nurse Lindsey and respiratory therapist (RT) Megan were eager to talk about Reese.

"She is a very thoughtful, playful and caring girl," they shared. They were also quick to say don't stand in the way of her and McDonald's chicken nuggets. She will only share those with Dr. Kristen.

From day one, someone from the family has always been with her at the hospital,

from the time she wakes in the morning till she goes to sleep at night. Until Friday, February 12, 2016, Reese had a nurse and an RT with her 24/7. With the surgery performed that day, the last machine was removed and she will no longer have the constant presence of an RT in her room with her. This is perhaps the biggest step to ending her stay at John Hopkins.

A Typical Day for Reese

From the time she wakes each morning, until she goes to sleep at night, Reese's day is full of activities to keep her progress moving forward.

Each morning she wakes between 7:00-7:30 a.m. and watches cartoons and eats a large breakfast.

"She can out eat any farmer in the morning, any day of the week," said her aunt Laura Jackson. "She loves her food."

At 9:30 a tutor arrives at the hospital to work with her for 90 minutes on her schoolwork. Reese has a handwritten paper hanging in her room that tells her new teachers 10 things they should know about her from "she is nice and smart," to the fact that "she likes to take five minute breaks."

After her time on school work, she has an



Reese joined her class during their Valentine's Day party. Her friends sent her many well-wishes and included her in their activities from her room in Baltimore.

hour of physical therapy, or meeting with her doctors before she gets her lunch. At 12:30 she joins her class in Mercersburg for nearly two hours of school with Double, the robot. Then it is Reese's free time to do what she wants with the staff or her family.

In Reese's Words

Recently we were blessed to spend a day in the life of Reese and see the incredible

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Reeseology: The Newest Term at John Hopkins

"Reese is absolutely amazing. I can find no words that truly give justice to what she means to me, but I'll try to give you a small glimpse into the impact of Reese—what we have affectionately termed Reeseology.

"She has taught the world of medicine so much. We have been able to accomplish things for Reese that have never been done before and because of that, Reese will continue to help other people around the world with severe lung injury. I also know that she's not done. She has so much more to continue to teach the world. God has an amazing plan for her and He has shown that over and over again.

"She is like no other person I have ever met. She is always thinking of others before herself, despite what she has been through. When I cry these days—so many happy tears now—she reaches out to hold my hand. I know of no heart more caring, giving or strong than hers. She has overcome so many struggles that would have crushed most adults and she has done so with such grace and bravery.

"I began this amazing journey caring for Reese in a medically induced coma, to help her begin the healing process. What I first knew about Reese, I learned from her amazing parents, Claire and Justin.

"She is a part of my heart forever and I cannot wait to see the incredible things that she will do—and I hope to be there to witness them all!"



Dr. Kristen Nelson has been with Reese since she arrived at John Hopkins on Memorial Day 2014. She specializes in pediatric critical care and completed her pediatric ICU training in 2007. She is co-director of the Johns Hopkins Office for Pediatric Education (HOPE), which is responsible for education of healthcare professionals in Pediatric Advanced Life Support.

Reese Burdette

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strides she has made. Following is the interview she shared with the *Jersey Journal*.

Reese, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Reese: I want to be a farmer. I am going to have cows—both Holsteins and Jerseys.

What is the first thing you want to do when you go home?

Reese: I want to stop at the barn and see my cow, “Pantene.”

When “Pantene,” your cow, came to visit you at the hospital, what was the best part?

Reese: Petting her again.

What do you miss the most about home?

Reese: Being with my family and friends.

When your nurses and doctors ask you about your life on the farm, what do you tell them?

Reese: It’s my favorite thing. It has been a part of me for a long time and I like to show my cows because they win blue ribbons.

What is your favorite subject at school?

Reese: Reading, writing and math. But I really like art and gym too.

Who has been your favorite person to come and visit you in the hospital?

Reese: My sister, Brinkley. And the Redskins players. (Four players have been to visit her: Kirk Cousins, Kory Lichtensteiger Darryl Young, and Chris Chester.)

What has been your favorite gift so far?

Reese: My iPad. I can play on it, Facetime with family and friends, Snapchat and when I leave, I can stay in touch with my nurses. Also, it helps me go to school every day.

What is your favorite joke?



Reese wants everyone to know she appreciates the love and prayers she has received from friends around the world. She says, “I love my gifts and everyone prayed for me a lot. My gifts gave me something to do every day. Thank you.”

Reese: What’s a cat’s favorite color? PURRRRRple.

What is your favorite food?

Reese: Lobster. Crab. Corn. And grits with cheese and bacon. Pancakes and waffles.

When you go home and have rules to follow, what one is the one you are least looking forward to?

Reese: (Big sigh) I am not excited about rules. I don’t want to have to eat my green beans.

How do you like the hospital food?

Reese: (Sigh and shake of the head) Not good. Not good at all.

Since being in the hospital, what has been your favorite thing?



A common sight on the PICU floor of the hospital each night is Reese and her bike. She stops frequently to talk with the many friends she has made and offers them gifts from her basket for taking such good care of her.

Reese: My birthday party. All of my friends got to come and see me and play.

When your sister Brinkley comes and visits, what do you do?

Reese: We play games and do crafts and we talk about things.

Tell us about your clothes here at the hospital.

Reese: I wear dresses. They are colorful. Not plain. Very fashionable. (Family has purchased many dresses for her to wear instead of the hospital gowns).

What is your favorite movie?

Reese: I have a lot of them. But mostly Dolphin Tale

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Some of Reese's best times over the past 21 months have been spending time with her little sister, Brinkley, and her cousin, Regan. The two have been a constant presence in her life and helping her heal. Regan was the first child allowed to come visit Reese when she woke up.

Reese Burdette

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What is your favorite song?

Reese: Whip/Nae Nae. We all dance to it!

What do you want for your birthday that is coming up March 20?

Reese: A chair for my new desk, a horse, and a goat!

What do you love most about your mom, dad and Brinkley?

Reese: They are just a funny family.

Her Continuing Impact

In February, Reese again had a first. She was invited to be a part of the John Hopkins Radiothon and tell her story. She is the first patient in the hospital to be invited to participate. Previously, only patients or families that had been released were a part

In A Mother's Eyes

As I reflect on the last 21 months, I realized my "go to," other than my husband, Justin, has always been my sister, Laura.

Through our journey, Laura has been so much more than a sister. In the early weeks, she traveled between hospitals to see both Mom and Reese, with our step-dad Michael. These made for very long days and sometimes neglecting her own family. When I didn't have it in me to make a decision for something as simple as where Brinkley was going for the weekend, she made that decision, often taking her herself. She handled things when people were asking about fundraisers and wanting to do something for Reese or mom.

She has been the one to create the beautiful posts that have made people fall in love with Reese even more. She has a gift with words that we never knew existed. She has organized countless parties for her nieces to not let special moments pass by without acknowledgement. These few things are just a sample of all she has done for our family. She has been the best sister anyone could ask for.

This journey we are on has shown many heroes, Mom (Patricia) and Michael for saving our girls; Reese for the battle she has fought; the doctors who have performed lifesaving procedures and never given up; and Laura for her unselfish ways and staying back so no light is cast on her. No words could ever express my gratitude towards them. ~Claire Burdette



Claire and Justin Burdette hold their family and friends close. It has been people like Claire's sister Laura, or Aunt Lala, as Reese calls her, that have been an important part of their lives during this journey.

of the yearly fundraiser. Her interview can be heard at: <http://www.hopkinschildrens.org/Reese-A-Strong-Survivor/>.

And a strong survivor she is. She and her family have had their strength and faith tested for many long months. The Stiles and Burdette families are thankful for the many prayers and positive thoughts. They are thankful to know so many people have never left their sides during this journey. Prayers have been answered and miracles performed.

Now as the road home is so close, the rewards seem many. The dairy industry is rejoicing with the family each step taken and looks forward to the first pictures of Reese back home at Windy Knoll View.