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DAREN'S CHOICE

Unable to move, or breathe on his own, does he want to live?

By DAN GERINGER, Daily News

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WHILE THEIR son, Daren, lies in a hospital bed - permanently paralyzed from the neck down, unable to breathe on his own after a bullet shattered his spinal cord - Lance Haver, the mayor's consumer advocate, and his wife, Lisa, wait for him to decide whether he wants to live or die.

"We had to tell Daren that there is no reasonable possibility that he will ever regain the use of his limbs," Haver said.

"We had to tell him that there is no reasonable possibility that he will ever be able to breathe on his own. We had to tell our son, 'If you choose to go, if this is too unbearable for you . . . ' "

Haver, who has spent decades fighting for the rights of the little guy - with rapid-fire verbal torrents of logic, rhetoric and skeptical wit - stopped talking and broke down in tears.

Although his mind is sharp, Daren can't speak, so his brother, Ramsey, will hold up letters of the alphabet one at a time, and Daren will slowly spell out his life or death decision by blinking at the letters he needs.

Late Saturday night, Haver and Lisa, a Philadelphia school teacher, were informed that their son, Daren Dieter, 24, a nephew whom they adopted when he was 9, had been shot multiple times and was gravely wounded.

He was shot in the neck and chest while parked outside Shrimpy's bar and restaurant on Cheltenham Avenue near 19th Street. Haver, Lisa and Ramsey, 25, who is also a Philadelphia teacher, have camped out at Daren's bedside since he was rushed to Albert Einstein Medical Center.

Daren's female companion, 23, who called police, was wounded in the right arm, and was treated at the hospital and released.

Northwest Detectives believe there was an argument between Daren and his assailant before the shooting, but had no suspect and no motive as of yesterday.

"I wouldn't wish this on any parent - walking down that hospital hallway to ask your son if he wants to live," Lisa said. "We don't know what he's going to decide but we will respect whatever decision he makes.

"You want the best possible life for your children," she said. "So when you look at your child laying there and he can't even breathe on his own, you say, 'I don't want this for him.' And then he cracks a joke by blinking at the letters Ramsey holds up and I realize that he is still Daren laying there and I don't want to lose him."

Lisa said the doctors "told us that first day that the damage was very serious and that the next 24 to 48 hours would tell. When he didn't start moving, we knew.

"They finally told us [Tuesday] that he was not going to move again and that he never was going to get off the respirator and breathe on his own. And it was time to ask Daren whether he wants to go on like this."

Haver said that Daren came to live with them when he was 9 "because his parents - my wife's sister and her husband - could no longer care for him" due to chronic mental problems.

"If we hadn't taken in Daren and his two older brothers, they would have been lost in the foster care system," Haver said.

While their oldest brother suffered from the mental illness that disabled their parents, Daren and Ramsey went to Central High, then college.

"Daren has the heart of a lion," Haver said. "He knew his father was in trouble. He had to remind his father to buy food, to bathe. He had to be his father's parent.

"So when he came to live with us, Daren had to learn how to be a kid. When he was 16, Daren took a part-time job so he could stock his father's kitchen with food."

Daren made art, ranging from handpainted shirts to a surreal favorite of Haver's. "Daren painted himself with his foot on his head," Haver said. "He called it, 'Free Your Mind.' You didn't have to wonder what that was. You just had to wonder why that was.

"He always hoped to make a living as an artist. Now, we might never find out."

Just before tragedy struck, Daren and Ramsey got their own place together and fixed it up.

"They moved five or six blocks away from us so they could still run home to our house and do the laundry and mess up the kitchen," Lisa said.

"Daren would decide his wash was more important than mine," Haver said, "take mine out of the machine and do his instead."

Haver said he plans to raise a ruckus, as usual, at today's SEPTA Board of Directors meeting, excoriating the transit agency for hitting poor people in the wallet by raising token and transfer fares while awaiting an October appeals court decision on whether it can eliminate transfers completely.

"If I don't take my pain and do something with it, it's worse," Haver said. "I'm sitting in a hospital being told bad news all the time.


"The doctors told us that there is no hope known to man that Daren will improve significantly. My son has the same type of injury that Christopher Reeve had."

Haver said that family and friends are looking for clinical trial programs that Daren might be a candidate for, but "it's the unrealistic hope of his grieving parents and family. We don't want to give up. I would get on the ground and kiss the feet of whoever gave Daren a chance. But it's not real.

"Meanwhile, we hope anyone who reads this will pray for Daren. We could sure use your prayers." *

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