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Steam-Blast Victim Remains Unconscious, but His Mother Says 'He Can Hear Me'

By TRYMAINE LEE

Gregory McCullough opened his eyes last week for the first time since the explosion, his mother said, shedding a broken stream of tears as the lyrics to "Jesus Loves Me" spilled from her lips to his badly burned body. Through tears of her own, his mother kept singing, praying that her only child would see it through another day.

"They can't tell us if he'll be O.K. because his injuries are too severe," the mother, Tanya McCullough-Stewart, said yesterday. "He is still in a coma but the nurses said he can hear us. So I sing to him and I know he's listening. I know he can hear me."

Of all the street damage, lost business and

frayed nerves from the steam pipe explosion in Midtown Manhattan on July 18, Mr. McCullough, 21, has endured the worst of it: a direct blast of skin-searing steam, multiple operations, a painful regimen of invasive medical procedures and daily cleanings.

One woman who worked nearby, Lois Ellen Baumerich, 51, died of a heart attack in the blast. Mr. McCullough was driving a tow truck that was knocked in the air and deposited in a crater near Grand Central Terminal. For nearly two weeks he has been in a medically induced coma at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell hospital with third-degree burns over more than 80 per-

cent of his body.

The first to aid him was Junior Suarez, who works for an employment agency at 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue. Mr. Suarez, 27, said he saw Mr. McCullough emerge from a cloud of dust and debris, covered in blood and mud, stumbling and barely on his feet. Mr. Suarez said that Mr. McCullough had jumped from the tow truck.

"I ran up to him and grabbed him," Mr. Suarez said yesterday. "He fell into my arms, and his skin was falling off. He was just screaming, and I felt the heat from his body. I've never seen someone in that much pain."

Mr. Suarez said he placed Mr. McCul-



lough down by the corner. After about 20 minutes, he said, an emergency medical technician came over. She tossed him a pair of scissors and told him to cut off Mr. McCullough's shirt. Mr. Suarez said he questioned why he was being told to do so and if

that was sanitary, but he followed the order while the technician worked with an oxygen mask.

As Mr. Suarez pulled the shirt off, Mr. McCullough let out a violent scream.

"My skin is itching. My skin is itching," Mr. Suarez recalled him yelling.

"He was holding my hand and he looked right in my eye," Mr. Suarez said. "And he said, 'Promise me I'm not going to die.' I passed my hand over his forehead telling him he was going to be OK. I promised. I promised him he wasn't going to die."

Mr. Suarez said he pleaded with Mr. Mc-

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Explosion Victim in Coma, but Mother Says 'He Can Hear Me'

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Cullough to give him a phone number of someone he could call for him. Through a few mumbled sentences Mr. Suarez was able to make out a number. He called it. He reached a younger cousin of Mr. McCullough.

"I haven't been the same since," Mr. Suarez said.

Mr. McCullough's family said that he has undergone multiple operations to remove dead muscle, and that incisions were made in his right arm and right leg to help his blood circulate. Doctors told the family that they needed to observe how well he was healing before deciding on long-term treatment, but because he was young and in such good physical shape, his body was responding well, his family said.

Ms. McCullough-Stewart said she sees him wincing. "Some procedures I just can't stand to even watch," she said in an interview yesterday at her family's church, the Christian Cultural Center in East New York, Brooklyn. "It's so hard to see him in pain and not be able to take it away."

Doctors have told the family that the cost of treatment could be more than \$1 million, they said. Hospital officials said last week that they could not comment on Mr. McCullough's care because the family had not permitted them to do so.

Mr. McCullough had dreams of becoming a marine, and after that a career in law enforcement, perhaps the F.B.I. or the State Police, his family said. At age 9, he was a member of the N.Y.P.D. Explorers, a youth auxiliary group, and by 16 was leading his own platoon. Later, he became a member of the First Marine Cadet Corps, where he earned the rank of sergeant major.

More recently, his days were filled with work and school. He worked 12-



Tanya McCullough-Stewart and Frank Stewart, the mother and stepfather of Gregory McCullough, who remains hospitalized. Junior Suarez, right, of Staten Island was the first to come to Mr. McCullough's aid.



Photographs by Damon Winter/The New York Times

A young man with dreams of becoming a marine and working in law enforcement.

hour shifts driving for One Stop Shell in Brooklyn, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. He would come home to shower, then go to martial arts training in Bensonhurst. If he wasn't too tired by then, his family said, he spent time with his girlfriend or went to a friend's house to work on the Christian magazine they were trying to start.

With very few witnesses to see exactly what happened to Mr. McCullough, his tale had been lost in his family's pain and their attempts to keep it private. Their home has been

staked out by reporters, and they said they have been chased on the highway. Strangers have called the hospital posing as doctors requesting his medical records, they said.

Their church, which has its own security staff, has donated its services to the McCullough family. A guard has been posted outside Mr. McCullough's hospital room door. Other guards have been posted at the family's home and provided protection to and from their home to the hospital, on Manhattan's East Side.

Judith Bailey, 31, who was a passenger in the tow truck, is in the same hospital, in serious condition. The two were returning to Brooklyn from the Bronx after dropping off Ms. Bailey's disabled car.

Each day, Mr. McCullough's family gathers by his bedside. His mother sings her songs of faith while his stepfather, Frank Stewart, caresses

his forehead.

The family has retained a pair of lawyers, Ken Thompson of Thompson, Wigdor & Gilly and Derek Sells of the Cochran Firm. The lawyers said yesterday that a lawsuit was imminent, and that they have started an investigation to round up witnesses and determine who is at fault for the steam pipe explosion. First on their list: Consolidated Edison, which owns the pipes. A spokesman for Con Ed said last night that the company "does not comment on litigation."

Also, a petition is being drawn up to make Mr. McCullough's mother his legal guardian.

"Why him?" Ms. McCullough-Stewart pleaded yesterday. "Why did this have to happen to Greg? I just keep seeing that big smile on his face. I keep hearing his voice. That's what I miss right now."