



Photos by Cheryl Evans/The Arizona Republic

Despite being dependent on others for her care, Heather Grossman leads a full life, including helping daughter Lauren with her homework. Grossman was paralyzed after being shot by someone who says he was hired by her first husband.

The legacy of abuse

Parents, children also suffering effects of attack on Paradise Valley woman

By Susie Steckner
The Arizona Republic

A bullet tore through Heather Grossman's neck. She lived to tell about it, only she does her talking from a wheelchair and with the help of a ventilator.

She speaks five, maybe six words at a time before the breathing machine kicks in and briefly stops her. Otherwise, she doesn't skip a beat.

Her first husband is accused of hiring someone to shoot her, leaving her a quadriplegic and permanently changing not just her life but the lives of her parents and children.

Grossman's story of domestic violence is far more dramatic than most, but the impact is the same: Such abuse shatters more than just the life of the victim. Family and



Grossman has no use of her hands, so nurses and other caregivers must help her drink.

friends are left to solve medical or legal problems, help out financially, care for children and more, taking on responsibilities that can last days or years.

"There's myriad impacts that oc-

cur that you don't even think about," said Connie Phillips, executive director of Sojourner Center, a domestic violence shelter in Phoenix. "It can truly last a lifetime, depending on the severity of the abuser's behavior."

As Grossman tells her story, her father gets up from his seat to give her a sip of diet soda. In an hour, he patiently gets up and down six times: three times to give her a drink, twice to check on her beeping ventilator and once to retrieve her appointment calendar.

It's just that way now.

Grossman's parents, Ralph and Florence Stephens, moved their comfortable lifestyle and business out of Minnesota to Arizona to care

See ABUSE Page B3

CONTINUED BELOW

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2003 B3

BREAKING the cycle



Photos by Cheryl Evans/The Arizona Republic

Heather Grossman is surrounded by her family, including her parents, who uprooted their lives in Minnesota to help her. She also has a contingent of nurses, including Aron Baleme (third from left).

ABUSE Victim's parents, children also suffering

From Page B1

for their daughter and her children, a 14-year-old boy and 12-year-old twins.

Although there are nurses around the clock, her parents' day still starts at 5 or 6 a.m. with work, followed by trips to the kids' schools. The day doesn't end until late in the evening when they finish up dinner, household tasks and work details.

The already difficult life has been complicated by Grossman's second marriage. She remarried a few months before the shooting, and she said her second husband was abusive and threatening.

The marriage ended in divorce this month, and a criminal abuse case is under review. John Grossman, through his attorney, denies allegations of abuse.

The Stephenses, both in their 60s, say there is no option right now but to help their oldest daughter.

"I believe in family and responsibility," Ralph Stephens said. "If I left Heather and the children alone, I could never have self-respect."

"We've been very fortunate. We've been married 38 years. Of course, being here ... has been a test because there's been so much stress in our lives."

In limbo

Most domestic violence victims fall into two categories: those who escape and those who don't. Grossman is somewhere in the middle.

Grossman, 37, is free of abuse, but she's also trapped in a world where nurses must do almost everything for her. They help clear her bowels and suction mucus from her lungs; they style her blonde hair and apply her makeup flawlessly.

The constant care and a strict regimen of exercise, sleep and medications keep her healthy. Short of a medical breakthrough, she is dependent on the wheelchair and ventilator.

Doesn't dwell on it

Grossman doesn't dwell on her medical condition, which she compares to that of actor Christopher Reeve.

"It's a little more difficult. It takes more time. It's just a challenge I have every day," said Grossman, dressed in a crisp, long-sleeve blouse and pinstripe pants, sitting in the kitchen of her rented Paradise Valley home. She moved to Arizona in 1999, partly because her body can no longer regulate temperature and the warm climate here is best for her.

"I've dealt with what hap-



Among the tasks performed by Aron Baleme and other nurses is helping Grossman from her bed to her wheelchair. Grossman was paralyzed after being shot in 1997.

"I've dealt with what happened to me. ...I just want to live my life as much as I can, as long as I can."

— Heather Grossman

Parents' upheaval

A former gymnast and cheerleader, Heather is determined that her life not be changed because of the wheelchair. In many ways, it is not. But she relies heavily on her parents, and in the past six years, the Stephenses have uprooted their lives many times.

The couple were at their daughter's hospital bedside in Florida and then temporarily relocated to Colorado for her rehabilitation. The Stephenses then moved to Arizona to help Heather through her divorce.

Today, three generations live together on a cul-de-sac at the far northern edge of Paradise Valley. The Stephenses run their shoe manufacturing business from a home office.

Besides dealing with work, they have been consumed with their daughter's legal woes and running a household for six, from mundane things like planning meals to shutting the grandchildren around.

On a recent day, Grossman has just finished a half-hour bike ride. Her father works in his office and her mother does laundry, stopping briefly to give her daughter a sip of a protein drink.

"I've been so fortunate to be able to have my family's support," she said.

The Stephenses have kept their home in Minnesota, and Florence recalls the couple's former life there as "just really pleasant."

Maybe they will return when the grandchildren are grown. Maybe never.

"This is not something you walk away from and it heals," she said.

Reach the reporter at susie.steckner@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-7962.

To get help

■ To find a haven, call CONTACTS at (602) 263-8900 for information about Valley shelters.

■ For information about other services, such as counseling or legal assistance, call Community Information and Referral at (602) 263-8856.

■ October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Look for expanded coverage by The Arizona Republic about this important issue.

pened to me. ...I just want to live my life as much as I can, as long as I can."

It has been six years this month since the shooting in Boca Raton, Fla. By 1997, Grossman was divorced from Ronald Samuels and married to her second husband. The Grossmans were driving to lunch when a car pulled up to theirs and a man inside opened fire.

Heather was struck in the neck by a bullet; her husband was grazed on the chin. She believed she would be out of danger after divorcing Samuels. But she said he stalked her, threatened her and then plotted to have her killed.

The two men Samuels is accused of hiring to do the hit agreed to cooperate with prosecutors in exchange for immunity. Samuels eventually was indicted on multiple criminal charges but fled to Mexico and was put in prison on an unrelated drug charge. He's now in

Louisiana facing charges in a passport fraud case. Florida authorities ultimately want him to face their charges.

As that case winds its way through the criminal justice system, Heather Grossman is living a full life.

There are regular appointments at the salon to get her hair or nails done, social outings, trips to the mall with her daughter, family dinners at restaurants, volunteer jobs at the kids' schools. She cheers on her sons as they play tennis matches or baseball games, and her daughter as she works out pom routines.

But her days also revolve around staying well. She rides a special stationary bike so her muscles don't atrophy. She stands strapped to a "standing table" to maintain good circulation and redistribute her weight. Nurses regularly move her arms and legs so she doesn't get stiff.