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Walking in high places

by Ann Fletcher

Nestled in the scenic dips and curves of Black Farms Road on Huntersville's rural, eastern edge, a red Davidson College flag flutters by the road. It marks an entrance and an allegiance but most of all, a beginning, a model of a living facility that, once completed, will be emulated elsewhere in the country.



The rural, pastoral setting at Hinds Feet Farm will provide a soothing setting for patients and families. There are at least 47 species of trees on the property.

Its origins lie in a personal tragedy that happened 20 years ago -- a tragedy which, over time, has grown into something hopeful and promising called Hind's Feet Farm. It is a community-based, non-profit living facility devoted to preserving quality of life for persons with traumatic brain injury (TBI) founded several years ago by 1985 Davidson College grad Martin B. "Marty" Foil.

"Our mission here is to maximize each resident's physical and mental potential and to develop meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging at home and in the surrounding communities," says Foil, III, who's not only the founder but the executive director of Hinds' Feet Farm.

Foil's vision is clear: He wants to build the finest program for brain-injured residents in the country -- a model that blends appealing architecture, countryside spaciousness and meaningful activities for residents in the peaceful warmth of a natural, wooded setting.

Foil, who grew up in Concord and lives in the Davis Lake subdivision just south of Huntersville with wife, Lisa and two daughters, has received support from many sources. National foundations and organizations, churches, students and individuals of all ages have contributed to the program. His alma mater, for example, has provided volunteers for everything from clearing brush, to hammering trail bridges, as well as a steady flow of financial contributions and fund-raising participants.

The project has been underway since the mid-1990s, but next summer, all the work, led by the immense efforts of two generations of the Foil family, will culminate in the construction of a 6,000-square-foot home for six residents with TBI, plus a greenhouse where residents can grow and sell their own plants, vegetables and flowers; and a barn for their livestock and horses.

These buildings, along with a horseback riding arena and several nature trails, will compliment the existing stone and timber office and adjoining 2,200-square foot multi-purpose center that have already been constructed. The new buildings will be where Hind's Feet really gets going.

"We are building this around what we want to happen," says Foil, walking through a multi-purpose center built of high quality copper, tile, and stone. Adorned with rustic lighting fixtures resembling deer antlers and wall lanterns with hoof imprints. All this is thematic. "Hind" is another word for "deer." The name of the center comes from a passage in the Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament. It reads "The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places." (Habakkuk, 3:19). Essentially, what the prophet means is that God will provide the means and abilities to do great things and maximize potential.

"That really spoke to my mother," says Foil. "It's about going and performing above and it struck us as promising, so the idea stuck and then the name did, too."

The facility resounds with a sense of permanence, warmth, function, and purpose. And, of course, with a sense of high calling done well.

Philip's story

The impetus for Hinds' Feet Farm began with a tragic accident in the Foil family two decades ago during Marty Foil's junior year at Davidson College. Foil's younger brother Philip, a high school sophomore at the time, was driving home from Concord High School on Branchview Drive with friends. An oncoming car driven by an 80-year-old man on a restricted license crossed the center line. Philip swerved to avoid being hit, collided in the guardrail and was trapped while the oncoming car kept coming. It smashed into the left front quarter panel where Philip was sitting.

"The driver (of the other vehicle) suffered minor injuries," says Foil. "The passengers in Philip's car suffered minor injuries and one broken bone. But Philip had a compound fracture in his left femur, a ruptured spleen, a break in his left collar bone, a subdural hematoma, and a bruised brainstem."

Philip wasn't expected to survive the ambulance trip to the hospital. He wasn't expected to survive emergency operations at Northeast Medical Center, nor was he expected to survive his first few nights at Carolina's Medical Center.

But he did survive. He spent four months in a coma and a year and a half in rehabilitation. Post-accident, life was drastically different. His injuries robbed him of most of his speech, memory, balance and mobility. During the 20 years since the accident, Philip has lived in homes for brain injury residents in Atlanta, GA, Durham, and Houston, Texas. He now lives with his parents in Concord and requires on-going care and therapy. He walks with a walker and is able to feed himself, but his injuries are permanent.

A 17-year journey

Carolyn Van Every Foil, Marty and Philip's mother, chronicled some of the family's most

difficult and inspiring moments in a brief, typed memoir written several years ago and entitled, A 17-year Journey To Here.

"In 1984," she writes, "there were no roadmaps or directions for our journey, but an unshakable belief that Philip would have a future and a hope. ... The positives and negatives of each stop along the way were our teachers"

Through their journey, the family learned much about the quality of life offered victims of TBI.

"Our first of two trips to the nearest rehabilitation facility was huge reality check," writes Van Every Foil. "Barely out of coma, Philip was commanded with abusive and foul words to brush his teeth. When I intervened, the nurse explained that most brain injury victims were rough sorts and only understood one language ...

"Philip had several bad, avoidable accidents, one that resulted in a two-hour surgery. ... We returned to our local rehabilitation facility to continue therapies, knowing we needed something better than the best. We asked where to go; no one knew ..."

But the family knew there must be a better way.

"Where was Philip's future and hope?" Van Every Foil writes. "I did not know, but I was beginning to see the best and worst of rehabilitation programs and to feel the growth of that tiny seed"

They moved Philip to a facility in Atlanta.

"We traveled to Atlanta every 10 days, and one weekend found Philip bruised and battered by a roommate who was physically violent if anyone touched him," she writes. "Some things are unspeakable. Philip needed a peer group in a place where temperament, behavior and compatibility were carefully evaluated and monitored"

"(In an assisted living home) Philip sustained a horrendous elbow injury which we discovered when the hospital called to check on insurance coverage. The injury was so severe that it took the head of plastic surgery at Duke over six hours to repair it. The surgeon was so concerned that the surgical site would not be attended properly that he volunteered his services and those of his clinic to examine and dress the wound until it healed. It had been an inexcusable accident as was the severe dehydration Philip subsequently suffered. It was time to come home, nine years into the journey."

A signpost?

Bringing Philip home was just the beginning of the family's work with victims of TBI nationwide. Marty Foil and his father, Martin B. Foil, Jr. began to serve on the board of NBIRTT (National Brain Injury Research, Treatment & Training Foundation) along with recognizable past and present members like NFL great Frank Gifford and Sarah and James Brady, who was shot in the head during the assassination attempt of Ronald Reagan.

NBIRTT serves as a funding umbrella for numerous organizations dedicated to brain injury victims and specializes in providing grants to researchers in the brain injury field around the county.

The goal of the Foundation is to find a "cure" for brain injury and improve the quality of life for persons with acquired brain injury and their families.

"Looking back, it is clear that the crossroads, turning points and stops along our journey were signposts and guideposts, directing and describing God's plan for Philip's present and his future," writes Van Every Foil. "Martin and I began a long search for land. For several years, to no avail. We looked for land in the Mt. Pleasant area. Early one morning, I was awakened by words pounding in my heart: 'You are looking in the wrong direction!' I immediately understood. We needed a large tract of land in an established neighborhood, minutes away from all the amenities and necessities one could hope for."

That tract of land, as it turned out, was in Huntersville.

"When I saw this property," writes Van Every Foil, "though not for sale, I knew this was it. Within days, it was ours and within the year, we owned the second parcel.

"I was now in labor with a vision that I had no strength to deliver. Once again, I was awakened by a voice: 'Ask Marty.' Ask Marty to leave a lucrative, promising career in the computer software development business? I could not have known that Marty and his wife Lisa had begun praying the year before for a career opportunity that would allow him to spend more time with his family. Nor did I know how much they wanted to do something significant for Philip"

The work on Hinds' Feet Farm had begun.

"I have been blessed with three wise men that have helped me hold fast to the vision," writes Van Every Foil: "Philip, with his unwavering spirit of love, patience, kindness, gentleness and goodness; Martin, with his unflinching love and tenacious work on behalf of the victims of brain injury; and Marty, with his undying devotion to family, friends and church and his amazing ability to tackle anything and do it well.

"We have only begun, but with three wise men, a board of distinction, a host of volunteers and the support of friends, the vision will be fulfilled."

'The big rock'

Marty Foil welcomes the opportunity to "dip you in the waters," or awaken the public to the fact "individuals that have suffered traumatic brain injuries are one of the most underserved populations in the country".

"I'm the guy who has to push the big rock up the mountain," he says, sitting to one side of his office "war board," an erasable board on which he keeps track of the farm's fundraisers, activities and plans. "A lot of people are excited about this facility."

The farm is a compilation of nearly two decades of work and prayer; a combination of all good things he and his family have seen at other facilities in the country. It falls in the category of a "Family Care" facility according to Division of Facilities Services guidelines, the governing body of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) which regulates medical, mental health and group care facilities.

"We can house up to six individuals," says Foil. "Anything above that is considered 'Assisted Living'."

Foil plans to do for brain injury what Susan G. Komen has done for breast cancer: Raise awareness and support on a national scale for those with the life-changing injury.

"It's not that traumatic brain injury victims are going to get better," says Foil. "What we're going to do out here is maintain a high quality of life for them. Philip is one of thousands --

tens of thousands -- that are victims of this tragedy. It is a silent epidemic."

According to the Center for Disease Control, brain injuries are among the most likely types of injury to cause death or permanent disability. Each year in the U.S., an estimated one and a half million people sustain a traumatic brain injury, which is eight times the number of people diagnosed with breast cancer, and 34 times the number of HIV/AIDS incidents. The national economic cost of brain injury is more than \$53 billion per year.

"Some of those injuries are concussions (that have only a temporary effect)," says Foil. "Some are lifelong manifestations."

For those permanently injured, there are but a handful of homes in North Carolina offering a few dozen beds. Recent statistics show that more than 300 people with brain injuries are looking for a place to live. Some homes have waiting lists of more than 60.

Not only is there a shortage of appropriate housing facilities, says Foil, but often those with brain injuries are placed in nursing homes that don't meet younger individual's therapeutic, self-esteem and social needs.

"Nursing homes are not the answer," says Foil. "They're great for what they're designed to do, but brain injuries run the gamut. Their needs are varied."

By design, Hinds' Feet Farm will meet those needs. The program stresses nature, music, art, horticulture, speech, and occupational and physical therapies. The land contains 47 different species of trees -- oaks, poplars, elms, ironwoods, hollies, dogwoods. To the greatest degree possible, the trees and the land will be left in a natural state.

The farm will offer resident horseback riding, planned group outings, and areas for visiting families to congregate and visit. That last is something many facilities lack.

The rooms will be large enough to accommodate all six residents at once, plus wheelchairs, equipment, staff and visitors.

The resident's home is a country-style design by Charlotte architect David Kelly.

"He's been wonderful," says Foil. "He 'gets' it . . . This house is the fruit of a lot of people's energy and enthusiasm."

The Foil family have personally invested more than \$1.7 million in the project. Fortunately, they had the means to do so. Martin Foil Jr. (Marty's father) owns Tuscarora Yarns, Inc. of Mount Pleasant, Oakboro and China Grove, a company which his father (Marty's grandfather), Martin Foil, Sr., founded as a young man.

More than \$2 million more has been raised to benefit victims of TBI through NBIRTT's annual event called The Checkered Ball, a black-tie affair which will be held for the thirteenth year on Jan. 31 at the Western Hotel in uptown Charlotte. The name comes from the events early ties to racing and the Charlotte Motor Speedway. More than \$450,000 has been raised specifically for Hinds' Feet Farm through foundation grants and other pledges. A five-year campaign called "The Cornerstone Campaign" is underway to raise \$500,000 for construction of the Main Residence at the farm this summer.

The completion of Hinds' Feet Farm, however, will not mark the end of the Foils' work. There is ample interest and momentum to build other programs similar to Hinds' Feet Farm elsewhere in the country. And, of course, since the state-licensing requirements, and indeed, the desire to make the facilities intimate and appropriate, limit Hinds' Feet and its

eventual imitators to six patients each, there is certainly a need.

"(Building this program in) Huntersville is not enough because the call, the cause, and the need are so great," says Foil. "We'll do them until we can't do them any more. We're going to make this our life's work."

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