

A Ranching RALLY

Community support sustains two injured brothers.

By Holly Clanahan

IN A SPLIT SECOND ON THE AFTERNOON OF MAY 18, THE LIVES OF Tyler Thompson and his brother, Trey, were changed in a fiery crash.

But it was in the long days after the accident – filled with tortuous uncertainty, surgeries and painful rehab – that the Thompson family began to see the silver lining.

“We’ve been blessed in ways that our minds never could have comprehended in any form or fashion,” said Larry Thompson, father of the injured men and patriarch of the Thompson Ranch in Texas’ Knox and Hardeman counties. “God’s good; he has been awful good to us. ... People have just come to our aid over and over and over again, and by the thousands.”

The first amazing assistance came from Keith Cypert, a Munday, Texas, high school junior who was driving the pickup Tyler and Trey were riding in as they went to check out a reported fire on the ranch. Driving down the highway, they were faced with a semi-truck that pulled out immediately in front of them as its brakes failed. Keith swerved, but their truck struck the semi’s fuel tank, and flames broke out almost instantly. Keith was relatively uninjured, and he pulled out Trey, who was sitting in the middle, and got him to safety. Then, with the help of the semi driver, he went back into the burning vehicle and retrieved Tyler, who was then on fire.

“He was a true hero that day,” Trey said.

As the brothers suffered through surgeries – two for Trey and eight for Tyler, who had third-degree burns over 27 percent of his body – more angels appeared.

One church member and friend, Kacy Latham, created a blog, www.prayfortreyandtyler.blogspot.com, that tracked their progress and allowed friends and family members to leave comments, which provided important encouragement.

As of July 1, the blog had seen more than 90,000 hits.

“It is unreal,” Tyler said from his hospital bed. He went home on the Fourth of July weekend, joining his brother who had been out of the hospital for more than a month, recovering from a broken arm and a crushed face.

Even with the pain he has endured from his burns and a severely broken leg, Tyler still says the people who’ve pitched in to help – on the ranch, on the blog and with several fund-raising benefits – have “been a blessing. The rodeo community, everybody, has just come to our aid, I guarantee you.”

The Working Ranch Cowboys Foundation pitched in with assistance from its crisis fund, which was a natural fit for the Thompsons, who are active competitors in ranch rodeos sanctioned by the Working Ranch Cowboys Association. A team from the ranch has qualified for WRCA’s World Championship



Tyler Thompson, left, and Trey Thompson, middle, compete in team penning at the 2006 World Championship Ranch Rodeo.

BERT ENTWISTLE



At left, Trey Thompson mans the branding iron during the team branding event at the 2006 WCRR, while Keith Cypert, right, helps hold the calf.

Ranch Rodeo six times – including this year, when Cypert was named top hand at the Vail Valley Ranch Rodeo in Eagle, Colorado, just weeks after the wreck.

The championship rodeo is scheduled each November in Amarillo, and Tyler and Trey – who are always on the team – plan to be there in 2008.

“A lot of people ask me if I’m going to be in Amarillo at the world championships,” Tyler said. “I’ll be there. I hope I’m in it. I hope I’m ready by then.”

And in the meantime, he’s focusing on his rehab – while not forgetting about his business on the ranch.

With a voice still scratchy from the ventilator tube, Tyler told his family members that they needed to be getting registration papers ready for a gelding sale at the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo.

“When I came to, that was one of the first things I knew we had to get done,” Tyler said. “I knew the deadline was coming up for that.”

The Thompsons have about 20 American Quarter Horse broodmares and two stallions, a son of Smart Little Pistol and a son of Doctor Echo, who also sired a Ranch Horse Association of America champion that Tyler rode a few years ago.

“We’re getting some pretty nice horses out of them,” Tyler said. And he’ll be glad to get back home among them.

“I’ve been kind of running it over the phone (from the hospital),” he said. “They’ve been picking up studs and moving mares, and they’ve been calling me three or four times a day.”

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WRCF’S ROLE

When the Working Ranch Cowboys Foundation is able to help people like the Thompsons, it’s just like family helping family.

“There’s heartbreak when somebody gets hurt, and there’s elation when they come back,” said Janeen Bailey, who manages the day-to-day workings of the foundation. “We’re just a big family ... I don’t know how to explain it any other way, it’s a family.”

Besides financial assistance, Bailey and Working Ranch Cowboys Association manager Mandy Morton provide emotional support to the ranch cowboys they’ve grown to know and love. Phone calls, cards and letters are lifelines to injured cowboys who aren’t used to spending much time on their back.

“Being able to help those people you care about so much is the reason why I do the job I do,” Bailey said. “It’s why Mandy does the job she does.”

And that job has gotten better in the last few years, when WRCF began hitting its stride. The foundation was formed in 2001, but WRCA had been giving out crisis assistance and scholarships to

family members of working ranch cowboys since 1998. Those first few years were lean, with just \$3,000 awarded in crisis assistance in 2000 and 2001. By 2002, however, the crisis fund gave out \$36,000.

“It grew in a hurry,” Bailey said. “And we have already, this year (as of July 1), given \$17,000.”

Scholarships awarded in 2008 totaled \$31,000.

It’s not necessary to be a member of WRCA to qualify for either crisis or scholarship assistance. But recipients – or their immediate family members – must be working ranch cowboys.

“As we well know, there aren’t that many people that qualify,” Bailey said.

And it’s not necessary to be a cowboy or a rancher to belong to WRCA – or contribute to its foundation.

“Anybody can be a part of this,” Bailey said, and members come from all over, including Israel and Scotland.

Visit www.wrca.org to learn more or call (806) 374-9722.