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Home invasion

Paralyzed man getting helping hands

By JUSTIN STORY, The Daily News, jstory@bgdailynews.com/783-3256
Friday, October 17, 2008 11:29 AM CDT

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For more than a year, Phillip Cole II's life has taken a series of unexpected turns and has been defined by interactions with people he does not know.

Shortly before midnight Oct. 5, 2007, a group of men Cole did not know broke into and ransacked his Louisville apartment while he was inside.

They didn't leave until they had beaten him with a golf club and shot him once in the back, paralyzing him.

"I was shot in the back while laying on the ground," said Cole, who was enrolled in the radiography program at Jefferson Community College at the time. "It felt like a lightning bolt came down through my body."

On one night last year, Cole's life was touched permanently by the malevolence of strangers. Since then, the kindness of strangers has helped Cole, 25, adapt.

He has moved back in with his parents, Phillip and Juanita Cole, in Bowling Green, and thanks to the help of a host of people who learned about Cole's paralysis, their Karen Avenue house has been changed to help him make his way around.

Employees with Paul Davis Restoration, Contracting Unlimited of Bowling Green, the Bowling Green Fire Department, Lowe's, Carpenters for Christ and numerous other businesses and individuals donated time and labor to make the Coles' home wheelchair-accessible.

What was once a sun room in the back of their home now serves as Phillip's bedroom, with the floor having been raised so that it is now level with the floor in the neighboring living room.

A closet and bathroom have also been designed to accommodate Phillip, who is taking online correspondence courses through JCC and is nearing completion of his associate's degree.

"I don't know what we've done to be so blessed, but the community has been amazing," said Juanita Cole, a fourth grade math and science teacher at Potter Gray Elementary School.

Connections established over the course of her teaching career enabled Juanita Cole to get in contact with John Simms, owner of the Bowling Green office of Paul Davis Restoration.

Simms has two sons who attend Potter Gray, and one of them was taught by Cole.

Simms took on the task of making the home accessible for Phillip, who had returned to Bowling Green in February after months of physical rehabilitation.

He oversaw the project of converting the sun room into a bedroom for Phillip, enlisting the help of other people outside Paul Davis who were willing to donate their labor.

"We were working over a three- or four-month period," Simms said. "It wasn't as time-efficient as I'd like it normally, but when someone's donating their time, you're not going to complain when it puts you off for a day or two."

J.D. Shuffett, a member of the city fire department and husband of Potter Gray secretary



Photo by Hunter Wilson/Daily News
Phillip Cole II (left), with his mother, Nita Cole, in a renovated room at their home in Bowling Green on Thursday.



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Jennifer Shuffett, led a group of firefighters who built a wooden wheelchair ramp to the Coles' front door.

Simms helped organize many of the other companies that contributed to the room addition, but there were many others who heard of Phillip Cole's situation independently and contributed on their own.

Carpenters for Christ, for instance, hung drywall in Phillip's room.

"I was really blown away by the response of everyone in the community," Simms said. "A lot of people who helped didn't know the Coles, but so many suppliers and tradesmen really stepped up and tried to make it as easy for them as possible."

More than a year after the shooting, Phillip Cole continues to adjust to reality as a paraplegic.

His sister lives in Louisville and studies occupational therapy, and when the family goes to Louisville it is either to visit her or appear for a court date. Three men have been indicted in connection to the incident, though none of them is accused of shooting Cole.

He has a distaste for his wheelchair and stays out of it as much as possible, taking classes on his laptop in a chair in the living room and taking an hour a few days a week to exercise in a "standing box," a podium that he holds onto while standing to help strengthen his legs.

"Who you are pretty much goes out the window," Cole said of being paralyzed. "Going from a life where I moved around a lot and tried to stay as active as possible to where I'm sitting in a chair all day long ... it's a feat for me to even go down to a friend's house."

Phillip works on becoming as independent as he can and his parents encourage him toward that end.

He is able to drive and fix his own meals, and his room is set up so that light bulbs, the ceiling fan and other electric devices can be operated by remote control.

"I had to get used to asking for help a lot more and saying 'thank you' a lot," Phillip said.

The family's driveway was extended so that it ends now near his room, and a ramp will soon be built at the rear entrance of the house, so that Phillip will have what his mother calls "his own apartment at home."

When he earns his associate's degree, Phillip would like to enroll at either Western Kentucky University or the University of Kentucky, and is considering studying business or management.

"He's got a lot of support from his family and an upbeat attitude," Simms said of Phillip. "This is the largest project I've done and one of the most gratifying things I've done."

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