

Chapter 10

Turning Tragedy to Triumph

“It is often your deepest pain which empowers you to grow to your highest self.”

—KAREN SALMONSOHN

The video was still going viral when the new year began. Since it had gotten so much exposure, I immediately turned the video into a platform from which Ricochet could spread her Paw It Forward message to help human and animal causes on a larger scale. I also added a small note at the end of the video asking for donations.

I found that people far and wide were not only willing to help, but *wanted* to help. They wanted to be part of something larger than themselves. Donations started coming in, so I knew I had to find a beneficiary. But who? With serendipity working once again, one morning I checked my email to find an article a friend had sent me titled “Ian Will Surf Again.” It was the deeply tragic but ultimately uplifting and inspiring story of Ian McFarland.

On the night of July 2, 2008, Ian McFarland, along with his younger siblings, Lauren and Luke, and their parents, Stephanie and Tod, left their hometown of Carlsbad, California, en route to Boulder, Colorado, for a cousin’s wedding. Ian had soccer assessments that day, so the family decided to drive through the night. The kids would sleep in the car on the way, and the family would arrive the next day. Stephanie’s sister, Melissa Coleman, was also meeting them in Boulder, driving west from Tulsa, Oklahoma. The

last time the sisters had seen each other was in May at their grandmother's funeral, and they were excited to spend more time together and with family. After the wedding, they planned to go camping in Colorado.

Melissa and Stephanie were two years apart and very close. They were used to talking on the phone every day, several times a day.

"I'm addicted to talking to you," Melissa joked to Stephanie because they spoke so often, each becoming worried if one was unable to reach the other.

Now Melissa worried about Stephanie, Tod, and the kids making the drive at night; she had a strange feeling a few days before they set out that something was not right.

Before going to sleep on July 2, Melissa called Stephanie, who was already en route, and the two sisters spoke briefly.

The next morning Melissa began calling to check on her sister and her family, but her calls weren't answered. Because she knew their route—full of mountainous passes and bad phone connections—she didn't initially worry. But as the day progressed, she began calling and calling more frantically. Something was wrong, yet she had no idea the McFarlands had been in an accident.

At 6:00 AM that morning, the McFarland family had stopped for gas and snacks. About forty-five minutes later, as they were driving up a bridge, they missed the curve. The driver lost control of the family's Ford Expedition on Interstate 70 about 150 miles south of Salt Lake City. The SUV veered off the road and into the median, then hit a reflector pole and continued down the median until it hit a wire mesh fence. There, it launched into the air, flipping end-over-end, falling off a bridge and onto the highway below where it came to a rest. The cement under the Ford Expedition was crushed.

Tod and Stephanie died on impact. Thankfully, the three children had been in children's seats but still sustained injuries; they were rushed to the

Primary Children's Medical Center in Salt Lake City. Ian was five, Lauren was two, and little Luke was only a year old.

Melissa and her parents were already at the rehearsal dinner when the message came: There had been a terrible accident. But when they tried to return the call, they couldn't get through. They then decided to contact the police and ended up spending hours at the police department as officers called various hospitals and police stations, desperately trying to get some information on the family's whereabouts.

It was not until sometime after midnight that they were able to find out the tragic, unimaginable news—news that would forever change their lives. There had been an accident, and Stephanie and Tod had not survived. The three stood in stunned shock. Melissa's worst fear was unfolding. Her sister, her rock . . . was gone. But as the reality began to sink in, Melissa had one thought: She had to be with the kids. There was no question. Ever.

She walked away from her life in Tulsa, Oklahoma, without a second thought and didn't look back. She and her parents immediately tried to get a flight, her mind relentlessly thinking of the kids hurt and alone in the hospital without their parents, and that, combined with her sister's and Tod's death, was a pain deeper than she could bear. And yet she had to—for Stephanie's sake and for the sake of her sister's children. Not once did she waver in her decision. Not once was there ever a moment of "What shall I do?" She had no children herself; she had no attachments in Tulsa. She knew what she had to do. She just had to be there.

They arrived at the hospital desperate to get to the children. As they arrived, more details were emerging like bad dreams upon waking: The first reporters to the scene of the accident didn't think Ian had made it. Luke had been awake and screaming. The children were LifeFlighted to the hospital, and when rescue workers found Tod's ID badge to Scripps

Green Hospital, they were able to contact his mother, who flew to Utah to be with the kids but had no way of contacting Melissa and her parents.

When they arrived, Ian was in a coma and having seizures. The doctors had put casts on his feet, and he had suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) called an axonal brain injury. There was no prognosis for him. That, for Melissa, became one of the hardest images to bear—seeing young Ian like that. She began praying to God for his survival. Lauren and Luke were badly bruised, but alive. The doctors urged the family to tell them right away that their parents were not alive. There were tears, shock, numbness . . . but ultimately the children were too young to understand what they were hearing. They thought Ian had not survived either.

The only thing that brought any remote comfort was holding on to these precious children. The doctors advised that it would be best to get them home and back to an environment that they knew, so Melissa, her sister, Christina, and her brother-in-law, Steve, left for Carlsbad, California, with Lauren and Luke—stuffing pillows up against the windows of the car so they couldn't see out. The freeway was now a very scary place for them. Melissa's parents and Tod's mom, Vi, stayed with Ian.

Once back in their own house, Lauren ran through the house crying, "Mommy? Daddy?" as Melissa stood by impotently, holding back tears. Scattered around the house were the to-do lists Stephanie had written before the trip; drawings and scriptures in Stephanie's handwriting. This time it was too much. Melissa crumbled.

But there wasn't time to crumble. The family had to care for the kids, and they knew Ian needed to come home. They began making preparations while Ian remained in a coma. After four weeks, he was flown to Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego, closer to their home, where he spent three months in acute rehabilitation. Just before being transferred, the doctors decided to place a shunt in his brain to alleviate some of the fluid

buildup. There was still no real prognosis for him. He was still partially in a coma. But the next day, Melissa brought his brother and sister in to see him. . . . and that is when Ian started to wake up.

For the next three months, Tod's mom slept with Ian at the hospital. Melissa brought Lauren and Luke by for daily visits and she also met with doctors and attended therapies. The doctors wanted to put Ian in a convalescent center, but Melissa said, "No way." She'd made the tour of the center and knew many of those kids stayed there until they were eighteen.

Following four months in hospitals, Ian was finally discharged, but he was legally blind, attached to a feeding tube, and paralyzed on his left side as if he'd had a stroke.

The trauma to Ian's brain left him barely able to speak, and he was confined to a wheelchair. A real problem with TBI is that therapy through insurance is rarely enough, and Ian's therapy costs were astronomical.

As I read the article, I thought about the uncanny similarity to Patrick's situation, and I knew serendipity was at work again: Ian used to surf with his daddy. I knew that Ricochet would find a way to help Ian McFarland. There was also another similarity—this time to my own life—and I was feeling its poignancy deep within my soul. Like Ian, I had lost both of my parents. Although I had been much older than Ian at the time, one moment I had parents, and in the next moment, I was an orphan. Already I felt a bond beginning with this young boy whose life had dramatically changed in a blink.

I had no contact information but saw that the article had been written by the very same news station that had created a segment on Patrick and Ricochet. *Another synchronistic sign*, I thought. I contacted the news station: "Is there any way you could put me in touch with the family? Ricochet would like to try to raise funds for Ian," I inquired.

While the video was still making its rounds, I didn't know how much longer this wave would last. I felt the urgent need to jump on the opportunity *immediately* in case the views began to dwindle in the coming weeks.

The producer put me in touch with Max Moore, a classmate of Tod's, who'd created a page for Ian on the Web site CaringBridge.org. When Max heard about the accident, he asked simply, "How can I help?"

Max opened his home up to family members of the McFarlands, and they accepted his generosity. Working in medical research, with a specialty in brain injuries, Max knew that with TBI, Ian needed help immediately. Moving quickly was crucial, for the longer they waited, the less chance of recovery. It was urgent, Max said, that Ian should be treated to a course of rigorous therapy at once.

"If you're willing to let me work on this, I'm willing to help," Max told Melissa.

"Yes . . . anything to help."

It was Melissa who touched me on the deepest level because she left her life in Oklahoma and never looked back. She had one of the most caring hearts I'd ever seen. She would say there had never been any question.

But Melissa didn't have the deep pockets needed to provide the kind of therapy Ian needed—around \$4,500 per week, in addition to leg braces at \$3,500. She was just trying to survive. Funds were running low, and time was crucial.

"His therapy is in direct correlation to his outcome," Ian's doctor told Melissa and Max.

It just so happened, however, that Tod, Ian's dad, had worked as a physical therapist at Scripps Green Hospital, and there, his coworkers didn't have to think more than a moment to come to the decision to help start Ian back on the long road of reclaiming his life. The normal therapy course for a

TBI patient was twelve sessions per year; with the help of Tod's friends, Ian received twenty sessions per week. I was in awe at Melissa's ability to manage three young children and such an overwhelming schedule of treatments.

Strangely (or not, as I would come to see with Ricochet's guiding paw), the first person Max met at the hospital while visiting Ian was Jennifer Kayler, Patrick Ivison's mom. Jennifer, who was training to be a nurse at the children's hospital, stopped what she was doing and sat down with Max and told him all the things he would need to do in order to raise funds, and all the people he needed to contact. She even wrote out an extensive list and emailed it to him, and, in hearing this, I could see the strange yet beautiful interconnectedness of all life.

Max knew he had to make Ian's experience of therapy a positive one somehow; he had to make it fun or Ian would quit. Young Ian would be training like an athlete, and that was hard on a child who was in pain and didn't understand why he had to work so hard and continue performing grueling tasks.

Max wondered if surfing might be a way to bring some of the fun back into Ian's life, but the idea was loaded with inherent problems. To begin with, Ian was still in a wheelchair and had little physical ability. There was the physical stress, but perhaps more than anything, there was the emotional pain. Surfing was what Ian had done with his dad. Tod was an avid fly fisherman, surfer, and rock climber who loved the outdoors, taking his family to the beach for picnics and dinners beside the crashing waves whenever he could. Tod had Ian on a surfboard by the time he could walk, and for Ian, those moments had been filled with love, not only the love of the ocean and surfing, but of that special time he spent together with his father, who shared his same sense of adventure. It was their bond together, their joy, their passion. They practically lived at the beach, surfing together whenever possible, and the beach and the ocean became a sacred place for them.

I sent Max a copy of Ricochet's video. With the way our image-driven society craved new stimuli, Ricochet might be old news tomorrow, so I knew we had to act quickly. I couldn't have known then how much influence Ricochet would have in the future. When I told Max we were interested in fund-raising for Ian, he was very eager for Ian to meet Ricochet. He said the surfing part could be great, but he was perhaps more interested in letting Ian be with a dog, because at this point Ian needed fun things in his life.

"Can you send me some pictures?" I asked. "I can make a fund-raising Web page for Ian on Ricochet's Web site."

Max did, and we transitioned into a new campaign that began fund-raising for Ian. But when Max told Melissa about Ricochet, she was understandably skeptical. One has to understand that Melissa and the children were in survival mode, just trying to get by day to day. Then one day she gets a call about a lady with a dog that . . . *surfs*.

"A dog?" Melissa said to Max. She really didn't know how she'd have the time or energy for one more thing. "Please, I don't have time for it."

But Max pushed her. Ian had always loved dogs. And he loved to surf. What could be more perfect? With little resistance left in her, Melissa agreed.

By then I realized the wave we were riding was bigger than I had ever imagined. When I first spoke with Max, I had no idea how long the video would remain popular, but since hitting its millionth view, it continued to climb, so I knew that Ricochet's impact was powerful and that she had the ability to touch lives far and wide. But it seemed she was destined to touch this one individual life in a very personal way.

We met first at Ian's house. It was January and too cold to surf. Melissa wheeled him out and down to the grass under the trees, while I walked Ricochet over to greet him for the first time. As if she knew exactly who

she was there to see and what she was there to do, she walked right up to the little boy with the long brown bangs and licked his face. I had a moment of concern that he would be frightened, but my worry evaporated as I watched a smile crease his tender face. Each time she licked his face, I could tell by his expression that he loved it. So I said to him, “Blow softly on her nose.” Every time he did, she responded with a lick. And Ian laughed.

I had no real expectations of their meeting—my main goal was only to get a good photo of Ian with Ricochet so that we might use that for fund-raising. His left side was still very weak, but he had regained his vision. He could toss the ball for Ricochet, which he did, and she pounced and brought it back. Sometimes she darted off to investigate life around the trees, and I wondered if she was perhaps giving him some time and space just “to be” so that our combined energies wouldn’t overwhelm him.

“He’s loving it,” Melissa said. “He loved the neighbor’s dog and always wanted a dog. I know he’s always loved dogs, but look at *how* they’re connecting,” she remarked. “That’s pretty beautiful and amazing.”

They connected straightaway, and later on, when Ian would be interviewed by the press and asked about his connection with Ricochet and what it was like, he would say: “When I first met Ricochet, I was so excited. She ran to me and kissed me.”

They were communicating on a deep level with no words exchanged between them. And yet they would not surf together until many months later. Ian was still afraid. The water was still too cold, and he didn’t like getting water up his nose. There were perhaps the associations with his dad, but perhaps more notably, there were also the huge physical limitations. Just like Patrick, Ian needed a team of people to help him in the water, but unlike Patrick, he wasn’t strong or big. He was little and fragile, and he hadn’t learned to hold his breath if he went underwater for any length of time. It could traumatize him into never surfing again.