

'I wouldn't be here without you guys'

Noelle Lambert returns to the Vineyard to thank the people who saved her life.

By **Barry Stringfellow** - November 27, 2017

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Noelle Lambert shares a laugh with Oak Bluffs EMS staff. —Stacey Rupolo

It was late morning on a picture-perfect July day on Martha's Vineyard in 2016 when Noelle Lambert's life changed forever.

One minute, the first-time Vineyard visitor was driving a rental moped to the Aquinnah beaches with her best friend on the back. The next minute, she was lying on Barnes Road, in the wake of a collision with a dump truck, realizing the severed leg in the road was her own.

It was an accident scene that left even the most seasoned first responders shaken. But Ms. Lambert kept her wits about her.

“There was an older woman at the scene on the phone to my mother, telling her I wasn’t going to make it, and I said, ‘All right, you need to give me the phone,’ and I took the phone and said, ‘Mom, I’m fine, I lost my leg, I’ve got to go.’”

Ms. Lambert’s resilience was on full display when she returned to the Island this past Sunday morning to thank Oak Bluffs EMTs and paramedics for saving her life. She also thanked Jim Burke, a bystander who witnessed the accident and had the wherewithal to make a tourniquet out of his shirt, which held until first responders arrived.

She was all smiles when she entered the meeting room at the fire station, her gait steady and strong. She wore her UMass Lowell lacrosse jacket with her number 20 on the sleeve, black leggings that left her prosthetic leg uncovered, and duck boots.

Over the course of an hour, Ms. Lambert, a buoyant, witty, 20-year-old college student repeatedly expressed her gratitude and got a lot of laughs as well.

She displayed an indomitable spirit that left attendees slack-jawed. “This past Thanksgiving I was with my family, and we all thought we should come down and say thank you,” she said. “This is long overdue. I wouldn’t be here without you guys. My friend Kelly Moran, who was also on the moped, couldn’t make it, but she wanted to say, ‘Thank you so much.’”

Ms. Lambert presented the first responders with T-shirts that said “Thank you for saving my life.”

“We can’t thank you enough for all you do,” her father Geoffrey said. “It’s amazing what you do on a day-to-day basis.”

In a particularly cruel twist of fate, Ms. Lambert was an outstanding athlete before the accident, having just completed her freshman season on the UMass Lowell lacrosse team. She’s still part of

that team, and fully expects to be back on the field this February, when the season begins.

“This summer my goal was to get back in shape,” she said. “Ever since I got my running leg, I’ve been surprising myself. I cut better on my [prosthetic] leg than I do on my other one. I don’t even think about it anymore.”

“She just has to remember to charge it every night so it doesn’t die,” her mother Judy said.

“When it does it’s like a peg leg, so I just walk a little funny,” Ms. Lambert said. “I’m focusing on 20 different things when I run with this leg; sometimes it’s a little iffy. If I step the wrong way on the ground in my running prosthetic, I’m going down. It doesn’t hurt; it can be pretty funny.”

Ms. Lambert said she wasn’t fazed about breaking her arm after tripping on the carpet this summer. “I didn’t know it was broken, and I wasn’t going to go to the doctor, but when I couldn’t lift a five-pound weight, my personal trainer told me to go to the doctor. But it was fine. I’m back practicing right now, so hopefully I’ll be stepping out on the field.”

Ms. Lambert said her 100-yard dash time is only one second slower than it was before the accident. She hopes to be able to play in an actual game by the time the season begins in February. “I’m just trying to figure out what position I can benefit the team with,” she said. “The game will be live-streamed, so I’ll let you guys know.”

Ms. Lambert said Ms. Moran, who also suffered serious leg injuries, has made a full recovery, and will be taking the field this season as well.

“That wouldn’t be possible without you guys,” she said. “I’ve gotten a lot of support from friends and family. I have a pretty dark sense of humor too, so that helps get through it all.”

Ms. Lambert said this past Halloween, she wore a big blue box, and took a picture without wearing her prosthetic. “I was an IHOP,” she said. “People weren’t sure whether to laugh, and I told them ‘It’s OK.’ Kelly and I both have had a sense of humor about it. The year before, I was in my wheelchair; she and I were Forrest Gump and Captain Dan.”

Never skipped a beat

"I was never upset at myself," Ms. Lambert said, "When I woke up in the hospital, I said 'OK, this is my life now.'"

According to her father Geoffrey, Ms. Lambert never went through the five stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — instead she went immediately to acceptance.

"She never went into a depression, never," he told The Times. "She had a little down time here and there, but she's hardly skipped a beat. She's always been like this. When she was little, she'd fall down, she got right back up, always," her father said. "She's the youngest of four, after three boys; they're all athletes too."

Resilience apparently runs in the family. Mr. Lambert said his brother is a double amputee as a result of diabetes, and he was a big help in Noelle's recovery. "He'd come to the hospital nearly every day. He was like a bright light shining in," he said. "He'd say, 'Hey Noelle,' and she'd look up and he'd do a little dance step."

"The first day I came home from the hospital, my friends were there in three minutes, and I was gone for the whole day," Ms. Lambert said. "I went to the movies that night. I tripped and said, 'I'm fine,' and halfway through the movie I felt my leg was wet and I was bleeding everywhere. I called my mom at 12:30 at night to come get me; she wasn't too happy."

Accompanying Ms. Lambert was her therapy dog Bailey, a Teddy Bear goldendoodle rescued from Alabama. "Bailey wouldn't be here without you guys either," she said. "I wanted a dog for a really long time, and after the accident, I was able to convince my parents. Now my dad spoils him like crazy."

Ms. Lambert recounted that horrible day in July with casual calm. "It was my first time driving a moped, and I think it was the weight distribution, and I just veered left," she said. "Kelly drove one before, and she crashed it. She said, 'I'm not driving it again,' and I said, 'OK, how hard can it be?'"

She's fuzzy on the seconds leading up to the accident, but neither drugs, alcohol, nor texting were a factor. "I've never had a drink or smoked anything in my life," she said. "People at school thought I'd been drinking, but I don't drink. My 21st birthday is coming up, and my friends want me to have a drink, but I don't know."

She said she couldn't text because her cell phone was broken at the time. She used a bystander's phone to dial her mother.

"She was amazing," former Oak Bluffs paramedic Kevin Kilduff said. "I put two IV's in her, and we didn't give her anything for pain. She was more concerned about her friend."

"I told my mom on the phone that I was fine but she didn't believe me," Ms. Lambert said. "Kelly called her mom and put the phone on the road, and she kept hearing the words 'amputation kit,' and didn't know what was going on."

"I asked Kevin if it could be attached, and he said, 'Nowadays you never know,' and I knew it was gone," she said. "I'm glad I was awake the whole time. When I woke up the next morning, I knew what had happened to me."

She didn't feel pain until she was on the MedFlight helicopter to Boston.

"Before that, it was like a numbing sensation," she said. "It wasn't like you would think. The worst thing has been the phantom pains. I had to have someone rubbing my leg constantly. I tried everything, and my mom suggested a hypnotist. I fell asleep, so I don't remember it, but ever since then it's been a lot better."

Ms. Lambert said she received a great deal of support from fellow amputees injured in the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013.

"A lot of people from the Boston Marathon reached out, told me what to expect, what not to expect," she said. "Picking a prosthetic company is like picking what college you want to go to."

She decided to go to Next Step Bionics and Prosthetics in Manchester, N.H. "I love everyone that works there, they've been really generous. They donated a socket for my running leg so I wouldn't have to pay for that."

Ms. Lambert has a walking leg, a running leg, and a waterproof leg. "The waterproof leg doesn't have a thigh. I literally just put it in my backpack and unscrew it. I just switch it at the beach," she said.

Ms. Lambert said Roseann Sdoia, who lost her right leg in the Boston Marathon bombings, has become a close friend and mentor. "From day one she showed me all her legs. I don't have a 'pretty