

Woman who nearly lost her leg takes first steps in 15 months

Suzann Burkhart: 'Things are going to get better for me'

By **JOHN WISELY**
Times Herald

Suzann Burkhart wondered if she'd ever walk again after her lower right leg was virtually severed in a hayride accident.

This past weekend, her doubt was erased. She took eight steps.

"It was scary, but it was a good kind of scary," said the 50-year-old New Baltimore woman. "I took four steps, and I started to cry."

Although the steps hurt, she was crying tears of joy. Ms. Burkhart was severely injured Oct. 26, 1996, when a car sideswiped the hay wagon she was riding. Her right leg was caught between the hay wagon

and the car. Only a flap of skin attached it to the rest of her body.

Following the accident, doctors considered amputation, but Ms. Burkhart refused. So after 15 months, 16 surgeries and countless prayers, she ventured into the walking world again. In all, she took 8 steps this weekend with her therapist on one side and her boyfriend, Andy Pasmarter, on the other. She used a walker but she put all of her weight on the leg for the first time since the accident.

"I felt like (Neil) Armstrong on the moon," she said. "That's one giant step for Sue Burkhart."

Mr. Pasmarter said the comeback has been difficult for Ms. Burkhart.

"She was scared to death of those first steps," he said. "She has up and down days."

Despite the progress, Ms.

Burkhart has a lot of work left ahead of her. She attends physical therapy twice a week.

In February, she will be fitted for an air cast that must be worn all the time, and this fall, she will undergo her 17th surgery to help return her injured leg to its original length. "I'm never going to be normal," she said. "I'll always have to wear a brace. But things are going to get better for me."

The driver of the car that sideswiped the wagon, Richard Briand, 22, never stopped. Mr. Briand, who was living at the Blue Water Area YMCA at the time of the accident, was caught by sheriff deputies five days later and charged with leaving the scene of an injury accident.

In November, he was sentenced to one year in jail. He apologized to Ms. Burkhart at his sentencing.



ON HER FEET: Suzann Burkhart is walking again. Although she doesn't do it for very long, that she's even up on her feet again is a major achievement for the woman who nearly had her lower right leg severed in a hayride accident in 1996. Doctors initially considered amputating the leg, but Ms. Burkhart refused. Instead, she has faced a number of operations. In the background with Ms. Burkhart is her boyfriend, Andy Pasmarter.

By **TONY PITTS**,
Times Herald

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Thu, Feb 9, 2017