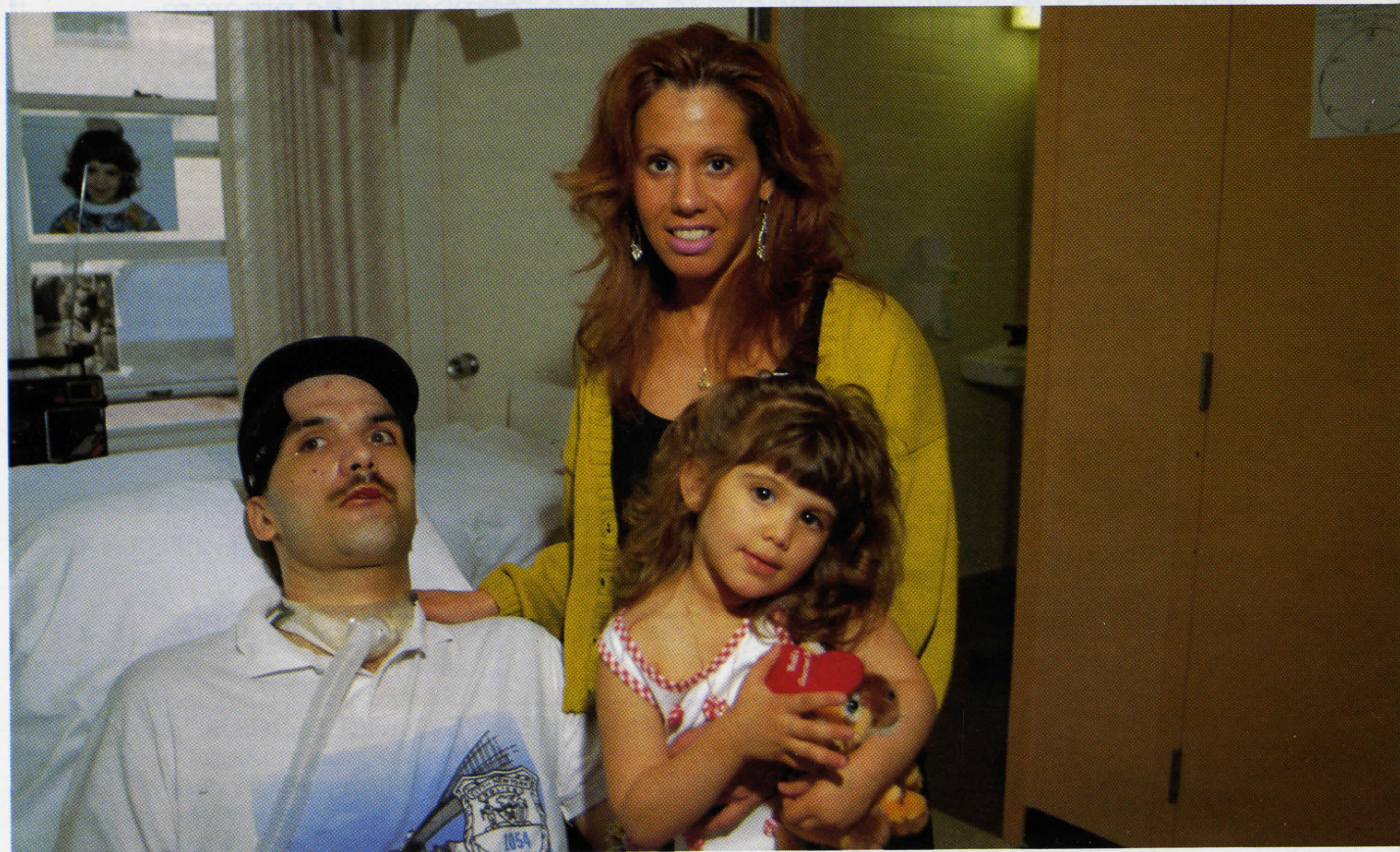


# When Time Becomes An Eternity



Comatose hero Police Officer Billy Gunn with his wife Lori and three-year-old daughter Jennifer at his bedside in the nursing home at Franklin General Hospital, Valley Stream, Long Island.

By Larry Celona

**L**ittle Jennifer Gunn runs down the long hallway until she finally reaches room 126. "Mommy, I'm playing with Lilly," she says as she sticks her head inside.

Lori Gunn, who is wiping her husband's forehead, looks up at the couple's three-year-old daughter and says, "Okay, but don't yell, and be careful in the hallway."

Jennifer runs off but not before exclaiming, "I love you, Mommy."

The little girl, who is down the hall before Lori can reply, misses the big smile on her mother's face. Lori Gunn resumes wiping her husband's face.

"She is getting so big, Billy. Next week is her birthday," says Lori, who is only six inches away from her husband's face.

But William Gunn doesn't reply – he just stares at the doorway where his little girl stood only moments before.

The setting is the geriatric unit of Franklin General Hospital in Valley Stream, Long Island. The reason Gunn, a New York City police officer, did not reply to his wife is because he has been in a coma since Jan. 20, 1989, when he was shot in the head while trying to arrest a murder suspect.

The officer, who was working in the 67th detective squad at the time of the shooting, was moved to Valley Stream in April so he could be closer to his family, who live in Massapequa Park. It is the third hospital Gunn has been in since he was wounded, which is quite an accomplishment since the doctors hadn't expected him to live through the night when he was shot.

"When this thing happened to Billy, I was told that he probably wouldn't make it," says Lori. "Twice I was told to make funeral arrangements."

But Gunn, once a tremendous athlete, has amazed his doctors. Although a large portion of his brain was removed in surgery, he is off the respirator now and breathing on his own.

"Billy has made some strides but he is still far from better," his wife says. "He still gets infections and every day is a struggle for him."

It is because of his fight to stay alive that Lori moved her husband closer to home.

"During the last year and a half I learned that family support is just as important as medical technology," she says. "And if he is closer, we will be able to be with him more."



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When Gunn was in Connecticut, the site of his previous hospital, his wife was able to visit him only once or twice a week. However, now that he is only 20 minutes away, Lori splits her time between providing a normal home environment for their daughter and daily family visits with her husband.

Gunn is currently being treated by Dr. Mihai Dimancesco in the coma recovery program. Dimancesco has had some success in returning coma patients to consciousness by using physical therapy and, among other things, loud noises.

The officer has a private room filled with pictures of his life in happier times. There is one photo of him in uniform, another of him holding Jennifer moments after she was born, and yet another of Billy and Lori holding hands and smiling.

Lori takes a break from the labor of love of assisting in his therapy to look at the pictures and talk about her dream-turned-nightmare life.

“We were such a happy family,” she says. “We had a nice home and . . .”

She is interrupted by Jennifer, who bursts into the room, runs over to her father, puts her head on his lap and hugs and kisses him. “I love you, Daddy,” says the brown-eyed girl. For the first 15 months after he was shot Jennifer did not get to see her father.

“I didn’t know how she would handle it,” says Lori. “Jennifer was content with just hearing about her daddy in the hospital. Then one day I overheard one of her friends in our yard teasing her that she had no daddy—everyone knows how cruel kids can be. After that I knew

the day had come when Jennifer had to see for herself that, although her father is not like others, she most certainly did have a daddy.”

Fixing the bow in Jennifer’s hair, she continues: “She was a little scared at first but then she finally went over and hugged and kissed Billy. She likes to come to the hospital.”

While her daughter is content with these visits, it is a painful time for Lori. “Sometimes when I go to the hospital, Billy is very alert and he responds to my questions by blinking his eyes, or so I think,” she says. “But then there are other times when he just sits there and stares. I tell him I love him but I don’t know if he hears me.”

That uncertainty, she says, is perhaps the biggest source of pain. It can be very frustrating for this brave young woman, not knowing if her husband hears her deepest feelings.

“If I had one reasonable wish it would be to know: Does Billy know what’s

going on around him? Does he feel us and hear us? That’s what tortures us—it’s very agonizing,” says she, visibly upset. “To watch someone you love suffer like this is terrible. You just hope that this living death is not a life sentence.”

While Lori hasn’t had one easy day since the tragedy occurred, some are tougher than others.

“All the holidays and birthdays are rough, especially Christmas Eve,” she says. “During the day I went to the hospital and at night I went to Billy’s mother’s house. I’ve gone over there every Christmas Eve since I’ve known Billy. It was hard because he was supposed to be there, too.”

When she isn’t visiting her husband, Lori tries to make sure Jennifer is happy and has lots of friends to play with. As for her own friends, Lori has made a few new ones since the shooting.

“Some cops call and come around,” she says. “The 67th Precinct, where Billy worked for only two weeks, and Queens TNT have been a great support to Jennifer and me. If there is any consolation to any of this, it is that I have made a few new friends who have been very supportive.”

As for the future, Lori’s life is on hold. “I have to wait and see what happens with Billy,” says she, fighting back the tears. “I’m not a big believer in miracles but that’s all I had to hang on to in the beginning. It feels like a decade has passed. I think that’s because you wake up each day hoping to see some sign of improvement. But it never comes and time becomes an eternity.”

Larry Celona is a reporter for the Daily News who covers the police beat.



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