



## Hundreds pay respects to Little League volunteer

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## Paralympians go for the gold

In this Sunday's Leader



# The

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# Leader

## Friday

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Surrey cancer survivor proud to once again participate in annual Fox run

## 'Terry was one of us'

by Dan Ferguson

ANGIE PIROG cradles her guitar in her lap, head down, long graceful fingers playing chords.

Her dark hair is cropped very short and she is sitting in a wheelchair.

"Coming home on a dark, dark, dark night/Sing a song and make it bright," the 17-year-old croons in a soft, sweet Celtic-tinged voice that fills the bright living room of her Fleetwood home.

She wrote the song herself, about two years ago.

That was when her right knee was really beginning to hurt.

It got so bad Pirog had to quit track and field. A year later she had to quit competitive dance.

Up until then, she would

**"Coming home on a dark, dark, dark night/Sing a song and make it bright."**

**Angie Pirog**

regularly participate in the annual Terry Fox run.

Like all Canadian students, she'd been taught the story of the young man who lost a leg to bone cancer and ran across the country in 1980 to raise money for cancer research.

She'd seen photos of Fox running with his distinctive hop-and-jump gait, his support van following behind on a lonely rural road during his Marathon of Hope.

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# Honeymoon hell

Newlyweds horribly injured in Egyptian bus crash still struggling to heal



Jennifer Pannu is finding it difficult to cope after surviving a deadly accident earlier this year that left her severely burned and missing her left arm. Her husband Rick Eladam also bears physical and emotional scars.

CHUNG CHOW / BLACK PRESS

by Ryan Starr

Rick Eladam had an inkling something terrible was about to happen.

It was May 1. He and his new wife, Jennifer Pannu, were on an overnight bus to the airport in Cairo, Egypt, heading home after their honeymoon in the Sinai Peninsula resort city of Sharm el-Sheik.

Around five in the morning, Jennifer was snoozing peacefully, her head resting on her husband's shoulder.

Rick couldn't stay asleep. The driver was making him nervous, tearing down a dark, winding desert road at well over the speed limit - he didn't even have the headlights on.

Three rows from the front, Rick watched the bus head into a sharp curve at full speed. It didn't make the turn, and smashed into a concrete barrier. Then it began to flip.

The seat ahead of Rick was driven into his chest, crushing his sternum and pinning him in place.

Jennifer was thrown about like a doll. The violent thrashing scoured her face, broke her teeth, sliced open her scalp and ripped off her left arm.

After four or five rolls, the bus came to rest on its side.

Rick was able to free himself. Behind him a heap of bloody, mangled victims screamed. And then he saw flames.

But where was Jennifer?

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# Crash: 'It wasn't our time to go'

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Rick searched frantically, eventually finding her lying face down, unconscious.

Rolling her over and getting a look at his wife, it was only survival instinct holding him together as he dragged her to safety.

The front of the bus exploded.

He continued to pull his bride's limp body from the wreckage. As he reached the edge of the cliff, the entire bus erupted.

The force of the blast knocked Rick off the embankment, and he landed on his back 15 feet below.

Left on the ledge by the burning hulk, Jennifer bore the full brunt of the fire.

It had been a dream honeymoon – a wonderful world tour as Rick and Jennifer began their journey as man and wife. In addition to Egypt, they had travelled to Lebanon and Dubai and were considering carrying on to India but decided to head home to Surrey early.

The couple was poised for a family and a life of suburban happiness.

Young and healthy, they had good jobs and a new townhome in Fleetwood.

But then, the crash. And the long recovery.

Scars from third-degree burns cover the majority of Jennifer's body. Her left arm is gone, and with it, the hand that should be bearing her wedding band.

Her once-long, thick, flowing hair has fallen out. She doesn't sleep at night, trapped in interminable pain.

When he isn't tending to his wife and dealing with the agony of seeing her and the state she's in, Rick is haunted by memories of that horrific May morning.

Rarely has "in sickness and in health" carried such poignancy.

As for a starting a family, Jennifer gestures toward her missing arm, "...how can I hold a baby?"

"If I can't take care of myself, how can I take care of a child?"

After the explosion that blew him off the cliff, Rick couldn't see Jennifer, only the bus engulfed in flames.

He screamed for her – no response. He tried to find a way up the cliffside, but it was impossible – the burning bus blocked his access.

So he kept calling out for Jennifer, who was unconscious above him.

Then, miraculously, she appeared. Rick told her to jump. Though she doesn't remember doing so, Jennifer moved to the edge of the cliff and fell into her husband's arms.

Her body was bathed in blood.

A half-hour later, an ambulance showed up.

Jennifer was on the verge of bleeding to death. Rick worked to keep her awake. She murmured she couldn't open her left hand.

He didn't have the heart to tell her why.

Using a borrowed cell phone, Rick managed to call his cousin whom they had been visiting in Sharm el-Sheik. Rick told him about the crash, the explosion, and Jennifer.

Rick couldn't breathe properly and he knew his insides were seriously damaged.

"I don't think we're going to make it," he said to his cousin.

Jennifer and Rick met in 2002.

Jennifer's younger sister, Sabrina, had just bought a new Honda Civic. One day somebody keyed it, and a distressed Sabrina called her boyfriend, who was Rick's best friend.

The guys came over and were in the driveway inspecting the damage when 19-year-old Jennifer, tired and disheveled



**Left: Jennifer Pannu and Rick Eladam in happier times during their wedding at Bear Creek Park temple last year.**

LEADER FILE PHOTO

**Bottom left: The burned out shell of the bus in Egypt following the fiery crash that killed nine and injured 30.**

PHOTO COURTESY CTV NEWS



after a day of classes at BCIT, pulled up and spotted Rick.

"Wow, he's really cute," she thought to herself.

She headed into her house, took a shower, and did her hair. Then she called her boyfriend at the time, faked a cough, and told him she wasn't feeling well – she wouldn't be able to make it to the movies that night.

Back outside, Jennifer sidled up to Sabrina, and bemoaned her manufactured plight: "It's Friday night," she sighed, "and I have no plans."

Sabrina suggested she hang out with the three of them.

Mission accomplished. By the end of the evening, Rick and Jennifer were enthralled with each other.

Jennifer woke up in a foreign hospital room in excruciating pain, not knowing what had happened or where she was. Around her were strange men speaking in Arabic.

Heavy bandages covered her deep, third degree burns. Unable to feel or move her left arm, she threw off the blankets and was confronted with the terrible truth.

She began to scream and was quickly sedated.

To keep her wounds clean, nurses would immerse Jennifer in a bath of iodine twice a day. The pain of the burns was soothing compared to that agony.

In a nearby bed, Rick wasn't doing well, either. His intestines, liver and kidneys were badly damaged. His sternum was broken, his back was battered, and he was bleeding internally.

Eventually Jennifer's mother, sister, sister-in-law and uncle flew out to Cairo. Their top priority was to get Rick and Jennifer on a plane to Vancouver as soon as possible.

The family signed every waiver the hospital put in front of them, and a week after the accident, the couple were on their way to Canada.

Rick is now able to chuckle about a final surreal moment at the hospital.

Jennifer had suffered multiple tears to her spleen and doctors had removed it. As she was leaving Cairo, perhaps by way of comforting her for the loss, she was handed her organ in a jar.

Almost four months after the bus crash, Jennifer and Rick are seated on their living room couch, talking to The Leader about how they are coping in their first newspaper interview since the accident.

They spent weeks in Vancouver General Hospital. So far, Jennifer has had three skin graft surgeries. She's become a strategic dresser to cover the wounds, but it's been hard to cope with the physical destruction.

As she gingerly pulls back a pant-leg to reveal the extent of her burns, she winces and gasps.

"My whole body looks like this. Some days I hurt so bad, I just cry the whole day."

Nights are worse. Sleeping pills don't seem to work. The pain overpowers the drugs.

So she just stays up and waits for the sun to rise.

"You lose your mind a little bit when you're up all night by yourself in that much pain."

Rick feels powerless.

That's not true, of course. He helps her eat, shower and get dressed.

Throughout the day he rubs her burns with lotion, a soothing routine without which Jennifer can barely move her limbs.

"Without him, I would be completely helpless."

A prosthetic arm would make a big difference.

"My skin will heal. But my arm will never come back. I feel like if I could get a prosthetic it would help put my life back on track. It would help me regain some independence."

Rick still relives the horror of the bus accident, which killed nine and injured 30 others. Jennifer has noticed he talks in his sleep.

"He'll describe these horrific things – he saw people burning alive. He'll say things like: 'The little boy is standing in the window, shaking. His face is all black and he's on fire.'"

The couple have been told they should speak to a counsellor to deal with the grief and the post-traumatic stress.

Jennifer isn't ready to talk in detail about her feelings yet.

"Maybe once I get better, then I'll be ready. But right now I'm sort of in denial. Like, I kind of pretend it didn't happen."

Amid it all – housebound, no jobs, no real income nor social life – there is a positive.

"Before the accident we felt very close. Nothing could separate us," Rick says. "But now there's this special bond. Even more special than before."

Rick and Jennifer consider themselves blessed for having survived. They see it as compelling evidence of divine intervention.

"I basically think God saved us," Rick says. "It wasn't our time to go."

"I deeply believe it's a higher power," adds Jennifer. "That's what gets me through these days."

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**Jennifer Pannu**