



Helga Bogarin overcomes tragedy for college diploma
BY DARIN FENGER, SUN STAFF WRITER
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Helga Bogarin died four times before she graduated from college.

The Yuma woman also relearned how to feed herself, figured out a new way of getting around and ultimately discovered that she really is capable of almost anything.

Bogarin's life almost ended in a horrific head-on collision in 1997. But even that kind of hell couldn't stop her. Instead she simply fixed her wings and learned how to fly all over again.

So imagine the wild applause recently when the 30-year-old wheeled across the stage at Northern Arizona University-Yuma and held a diploma in her hand.

"There were all these guys down in the front row screaming, 'Go Helga!' And I didn't even know them!" Bogarin said, beaming. "I felt so good. I thought I'd never make it, but I guess I'm stronger than I thought."

Doctors once said she could never hope for more from her broken body than a lifetime as a "vegetable." But Bogarin says she's always known that God always had more in store for his long-suffering daughter.

"There were so many times that my heart stopped. He's had so many chances to take me with him. But he's left me here and I really feel blessed in life. It's just a blessing to be alive."

Bogarin says she's also thankful that her accident taught her almost as much as any college degree. In addition to learning patience and gratitude for even the



PHOTO BY TERRY KETRON/THE SUN
HELGA BOGARIN tries on her mortarboard.

simplest things, she says she learned how a difficult struggle only brings out the fighter in her.

"I push myself hard to accomplish what I need. If I set my mind to something, then I have to do it. It would be easy to think 'I'm on disability, so I'll just sit at home and do nothing.' But that's not going to help me as a person. I need to be out there meeting people, doing something with my life."

Bogarin was driving in Mexico, just east of Los Algodones, on that fateful day in 1997. She was 20, had graduated from Kofa High School just three years before and was doing bookkeeping for a construction company.

She never made it to her uncle's house that day. Instead, another vehicle would run her Mitsubishi Eclipse off the road and Bogarin's young life would be thrown into a deep coma.

"I just remember admiring the water in the Colorado River. There usually isn't any, but there was then. Then the next thing I know, I wake up and I can't walk, I can't walk. I can't move at all."

She was also confused about not still being behind the wheel, about to make that dangerous-looking curve.

"When I woke up, I was actually in Phoenix and I'd already been in the hospital in Mexicali, Mexico, for three weeks."

Bogarin suffered a concussion, and both her lungs were punctured. Ribs were fractured, her pelvis was fractured in two places, her jaw was broken in three places, and the accident had wreaked severe nerve damage to her legs.

She stayed in Phoenix for a month and then spent the same time at a Yuma nursing center.

"But I just knew that I wasn't going to stay like that. I was going to get better."

Bogarin's first goal? Eating by herself. It took four months.

The second was to bathe on her own. That took an entire year.

"It's been a rough road," Bogarin admitted. "You're 20 years old and everything is going perfectly - you think. And then, suddenly, life just knocks you down. It's hard to overcome, but you look on the positive side. You always have to look at the positive side."

She credits her large, tight-knit family for seeing her through. "My family has been such an amazing support for me. I couldn't have done anything of this without them. They have been so positive and encouraging from the start."

It wasn't just physical injuries that taunted Bogarin. A psychological battle also played out in her mind at first.

"I tried so hard to remember what happened that day. The other guy died on impact and I had to know whether it was my fault or not. But a doctor told me to me to just drop it. If my mind has forgotten what happened, there's a reason."

Today, walking and breathing remain Bogarin's greatest obstacles. Her left leg requires a brace and suffers a great deal of nerve damage and is mostly immobile and numb below the hip.

"I can move my right leg. It's what I use to drive!" she declared proudly. "I can only walk short distances before I'm completely out of breath."

She uses a walker around the house and a wheelchair most everywhere else.

Bogarin's health had improved so much by 2002 that her mother convinced her to enroll at NAU. But Bogarin wasn't exactly the willing student at first.

"After she saw I was just staying at home, she said 'You have to do something with your life.' But I was scared to death. I thought I wasn't going to fit in because of the wheelchair. At 23, I felt old to be going back to school."

But it was the exact opposite that she found at the school.

"Even the instructors were really helpful. And I've made the best friends there. It's just been great."

Bogarin ended up being the first person in her family to graduate from college. "Hopefully, I can now persuade young ones in my family to continue with their schooling."

With a degree in social work under her belt, she's now talking about continuing for her master's degree. She and her husband, Antonio, are also hoping to start a family one day soon.

Bogarin said her professional goal is to one day work with young people from around the community who have some form of physical injury or disability. That's because it turns out that Bogarin's wings aren't just strong enough to carry herself, but also anyone else needing some help along the way.

"I want to be able to tell parents not to give up on their children," she said with excitement. "And I want to persuade the kids to just keep on going - never give up."