



NOLA

(A Journey of Hope after Traumatic Brain Injury)

By Judy Sprik with Ron Sprik

Copyright by
Ron and Judy Sprik,
2004

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

*Additional copies
of this book can be obtained through
ronsprk@juno.com*

*In Memory
of
Marilyn Begay
Dec. 10, 1937 - Nov. 17, 2003*

*Our sister, friend and mentor
whose indispensable encouragement and assistance
helped make the completion of this book a reality.
She persisted with her helpful advice and editing
even during her battle with cancer.*

Dedicated to

All who have stood with us in prayer and support from day one of Nola's accident. Some of you are mentioned in this book. Others of you, though not mentioned, were also God's provisions to us.

Special thanks to

Our son Roger for teaching us how to use our computer for writing and for his assistance in preparing manuscripts and photos.

All of our children for their input, suggestions, letters to Nola included in this book and their support for this project.

Barb Gerling for formatting the book in preparation for proof reading and publication. Thanks also to Barb for the cover design and artwork.

Lois Postma for proof reading.

All who prayed for this project and encouraged us to complete it.

Our Heavenly Father, above all, who supplies us with His grace and gives us reasons for hope, even turning human tragedy into heavenly blessings. Also, for allowing us the privilege of having this story to share.



INTRODUCTION

The story you are about to read concerns Nola, the third of five children the Lord gave us. Born while we were living in Puerto Rico, engaged in mission work among Spanish speaking people, her name was conveniently chosen because it is pronounced the same in both Spanish and English. Some of her Spanish speaking friends found it convenient to tease her by saying *no la toques*, meaning don't touch her or *no la tires*, meaning don't throw her. While she survived this teasing without noticeable ill effects, Nola did not survive a much greater happening in her life—traumatic brain injury—without major life-changing effects for her and for our family.

Nola was bilingual from the start, picking up Spanish from playing with neighborhood children while learning English in our home. She also learned about Jesus at an early age. Our hearts were warmed, but not surprised, when her first grade teacher at Maranatha Baptist Academy told us Nola had prayed to accept Jesus into her heart.

Nola was known to attract neighborhood children to our backyard and home. She told us she wanted to run an orphanage some day. She was willingly involved in our mission work and at age fourteen taught her very own class in Vacation Bible School. Tears flowed easily as she said good-bye to her Puerto Rican friends when it was time for our family to go stateside for Home Service. Leaving the friends she made during the three months in Michigan became another emotional experience, but she kept in touch by faithful letter writing.

Since there was no school bus system, we always drove our children to school. When Roger, our oldest, got his drivers license, he became the chauffeur, and we sent our five children off each

weekday—all decked in their school uniforms—with a prayer for their safety.

Our family moved back to the states, to Michigan, in 1985, when Nola was a sophomore in high school. She took drivers training the following summer and as a result got herself and us into the habit of wearing our seat belts. At church she played piano for the children and also helped with the Calvinette program for girls. She was active in the young people's group and was known to lead the entire group of young people to sit in the front pew of the church after there were complaints of them being disruptive in the back row during the evening church services.

In her junior year Nola tried out for the acapella choir at school and was elated upon being accepted. In a discussion with another pastor's daughter at school about getting labeled preacher's kid she emphatically stated that she was proud of it.

Nola's teen-age years were not without struggles as she faced the temptations common to all of her age. Yet her faith in Christ was growing and she publicly professed this faith in our church at age sixteen, less than a year before an accident radically changed her life.



PREFACE

This book first came into my thoughts in 1989 after reading books of individuals who survived serious brain injury, with amazing come-backs. Those stories brought me the hope that someday Nola's life would be back to normal or near normal and we would be able to write such a book about her.

By 1993 Nola was by no means back to normal, so the idea of writing a book did not appear to be what we would be privileged to do. Yet there had been so many little miracles, so many answers to prayers and so many evidences of God's faithfulness along our journey with Nola it seemed appropriate to share those in writing. Encouragement to do so came through others with whom we shared the idea, particularly my sister Marilyn, who offered to assist in the proofreading and editing.

It wasn't until 1996 I finally felt strong enough emotionally to begin writing about our experiences. I started by looking back in my journal notes and signing up for a community education class called Writing from Memory. In this class I was required to come up with one to two pages of my own writing each week to share with the other class members. The others in the class, mainly senior citizens who shared past memories of their growing up days, took an interest in Nola's story and were excited from week to week to learn more. When the class ended I was barely started with the book. My professor and my classmates encouraged me to keep writing.

I quickly lost the motivation to continue writing, however, with no deadline to meet. Besides, reliving the experiences as I wrote about them was sometimes painful and emotionally draining. "Writing is

hard work”, I wrote to my sister Marilyn. She responded: “I would like to encourage you to keep going even though your enthusiasm level is down. You are writing an important story!” I continued, with hopes of completing the task by January, 2000, marking Nola’s 30th birthday. Again I sloughed off and became doubtful and discouraged about the project that I just couldn’t bring to completion. Marilyn’s words again encouraged me. “Don’t worry! The story will always be on your heart.”

In 2002 I finished writing. My husband, Ron, also wrote two chapters, something he had desired to do. Now, after numerous revisions, this book has become a reality. I have benefited from writing and it is my prayer that you, the reader, will benefit as well. May you take courage and experience hope for your journey even as you read about hope in Nola’s story. May God be glorified!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. The Accident	3
2. Intensive Care.....	7
3. Flashbacks	13
4. Facing A Critical Issue	15
5. The Prayer Service	17
6. Day Five - Hope	21
7. Day Six - A Hymn	23
8. Days Seven Through Thirty-one - What's Next?.....	27
9. Moving On	33
10. Beginnings in Rehab	35
11. The Jaw Problem.....	39
12. A Taste of Home	43
13. Setback	47
14. New Hope	53
15. Mary Free Bed Hospital	59
16. Visitors Hospital.....	63
17. Breakthrough	69
18. Home to Stay	73
19. On-going Challenges in Rehab	77
20. Emotions and Celebrations	87
21. A Vacation Trip and Memories	91
22. The Move to Minnesota (Year Four)	95
23. WACOSA (Years Five to Seven)	103
24. Home and Community Experiences	109
25. Rehabilitated	119
26. On-going Evidences of God's Grace	127
27. Nola's Hope	133
28. The Role of Suffering	135
29. Doctors, Doctors Everywhere	145
30. Letters from Siblings	149
31. Poems	155
Notes.....	157



CHAPTER ONE

The Accident

It was Monday morning, March 16, 1987. My husband Ron woke up at 4:30. This was not unusual for him the day after the busiest day of his week. He would rehash in his mind the sermons he had preached and all the other Sunday activities he had been intensely involved in as pastor of the West Olive Christian Reformed Church. He first of all engaged in his personal devotions and remembers meditating on Psalm 27 that morning, words that would later bring great comfort to him. Then he went to the basement to work on a room we were finishing for our son Roger. We wanted Roger to have a bedroom of his own upon returning from his college semester in Spain.

The rest of the morning was not to be normal in any way. Usually I would get up at 6:30, but this morning I felt tired and decided to sleep in as long as possible. Nola, our seventeen-year-old, a junior at Holland Christian High School, woke up to her own alarm and got ready for school. After eating breakfast she called down to her father in the basement to come up and join her for Bible reading and prayer. Normally in our home we would be the ones to call our children together for family devotions before everyone left for school.

At 7:30 I awoke to the sound of a car horn. Jumping out of bed, I pulled the curtains aside to look out of our upstairs bedroom window. Curiosity prompted me to take an especially close look at the car and its driver—Eric. This was the first time Nola was riding with him and she had expressed relief at not having to endure the long school bus route. Eric's Mustang paused just long enough for Nola to hop into the front

passenger seat. Then they were off, with the sound of music from the car radio still lingering in my ear. The next stop would be to pick up Nola's friend Carrie who lived about two miles from our house. Fourteen more miles lay between her home and the school.

Meanwhile, our younger children, Sam and Lynelle had awakened and were busy getting ready for school. I would be taking them because I worked part-time as a teacher's aide in their South Olive Christian School.

At 8:00 our preparations were interrupted by a phone call. Lynelle answered and then handed me the phone. It was Myrna, Carrie's mother. "The kids have been in an accident," she reported. "My neighbor called to tell me. I know that Carrie is okay, but I don't know about the others. The ambulance is taking them all to Holland Community Hospital." Before hanging up Myrna told us to go directly to the hospital and not to the accident scene.

I was concerned but I didn't panic. In my mind I pictured some cuts and bruises that needed to be taken care of at the emergency room. Immediately I informed Ron about the call and we prepared to leave for the hospital. Not wanting Sam and Lynelle to miss school unnecessarily, we decided to send them. Sam took the bus, while Lynelle chose to ride with us and be dropped off on our way to the hospital. We asked them to inform the principal and teacher, who I assisted, why I would be late. "We will let you know about Nola as soon as possible," we assured them as we said good-bye.

The first person we met at the hospital was a police officer standing at the telephone booth. We identified ourselves and he told us he had been trying to contact us. He began to relate what had happened. Apparently, Eric failed to stop at the intersection of Port Sheldon Street and 152nd Avenue (about a mile beyond Carrie's house). A pickup coming full speed from the right hit them broadside, just ahead of where Nola was sitting. The car spun out of control and hit a telephone pole, splitting it in two. "She had her seat belt on," he said, "and that saved her life." Later we learned that this police officer had been in close range and within minutes had arrived at the scene of the accident.

Proceeding to the emergency area, we were met by personnel who told us Nola was unconscious and it was best that we not try to see her.

The doctors were busy preparing to transfer her to Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, where a neurosurgeon could attend to her. She had sustained head injuries and was in critical condition. Ron expressed a need to see Nola and was allowed to enter the room briefly. From what he saw, he was struck by the seriousness of her injuries.

Carrie was in a nearby room of the emergency area and her mother was with her. The door was open so we went in to find out how she was doing. She was being treated for cuts and bruises. Carrie did not remember the accident. She recalled only something flashing coming from the right and then waking up, pinned in reverse position in the back seat of the car.

We learned that Eric had been thrown out of the car and was semi-conscious. The extent of his injuries was unknown. The driver of the pickup had suffered broken bones. His vehicle had flipped over after the impact. Both he and Eric were being admitted to Holland Hospital.

When the doctor finally came out to see us, he told us Nola was ready to leave by ambulance for Butterworth Hospital. “Her blood pressure is very low,” he said solemnly, “and I don’t know if she is going to make the trip.”

Sensing our anxiety, the doctor cautioned us against trying to follow the ambulance and advised us to drive at normal speed. It would be awhile, he said, before we could see Nola anyway, since the medical team would be working with her.

We made a telephone call to our children’s school before we left, knowing that Sam and Lynelle were waiting to hear from us. We talked to the principal, Mr. DenBoer, told him about Nola’s critical condition “and asked if someone could take our children home as soon as possible. Ron and I also talked to our son Sam. Then we called my mother, asked her to go to our house to be with the children and wait for further word from us.

The 35-mile drive to Butterworth seemed much longer than that. Yet it gave my husband and myself a chance to talk and pray. I recalled a Christian radio program I had heard the week before tell about a father whose daughter was critically injured and how he kept praying for God to give her “one more breath.” That prayer now became mine as we made our way to Butterworth Hospital.

Later, we learned others were already joining us in prayer. Our church prayer chain had been activated. At Holland Christian High School, principal Mr. Vander Ark informed the student body of the accident at morning chapel time and offered prayers for the injured ones. At South Olive Christian School the principal summoned the whole student body to the lobby for prayer before Sam and Lynelle were taken home.



CHAPTER TWO

Intensive Care

After parking our car in the parking ramp at Butterworth Hospital, we proceeded through the nearest entrance into the building. We had been here previously for hospital visits and for the happy occasion of our youngest daughter's birth, but we had no idea where to go in this situation. Spotting a doctor, we explained to him what had happened and asked where the ambulance would have taken Nola. He directed us through several corridors until we reached an area on the lower level of the hospital. We assumed we were in the emergency area but we were not sure.

An attendant at the area desk escorted us to a private family waiting room. "Remain here for word from the doctors who are attending Nola," she told us. "But be prepared for a long wait!"

By this time it was late morning. There was a phone in the room and, after collecting our thoughts, we began to make some calls.

The first call was to my sister Donna who worked at Mary Free Bed Hospital, about a ten-minute drive from Butterworth. She left her work immediately and came to be with us.

Next, we called our oldest daughter, Anita, a student at Calvin College, which was nearby. Nola had just spent part of the past weekend with Anita. Nola had driven up on Friday after school and they had spent Friday evening and overnight together on campus. Anita had expressed concern about Nola driving back alone and called us on Saturday to make sure she was home safely. "How will Anita react to what happened today?" I thought, with much concern.

This was exam day for Anita and we considered waiting so she could finish her exams before we broke the news to her. However, since we did not want her to hear about the accident from someone else, we decided to call right away. We reached her in her dorm room and told her everything we knew at that point. Donna offered to get Anita so she could be with us. Anita gratefully accepted the offer.

We called home to talk to my mother and our children Sam and Lynelle. We wanted them to be with us. They were already preparing to come with my sister Barb and brother-in-law Gord. We also called Ron's sister Lila so she would know and inform the rest of his family.

The only family member we did not call was our oldest son Roger. We did not know how to reach him, so we called the college chaplain, who offered to work on contacting him for us.

After a couple of hours, but what seemed like a much longer time, a medical staff person gave us our first report. The doctors had been able to stabilize Nola's blood pressure and were going to need more time to prepare her for transfer to the intensive care unit. We were instructed to go to the fifth floor waiting room, adjacent to the intensive care unit, and wait there for further word.

The waiting room on the fifth floor was large and used by all families who had loved ones in ICU. The phone rang frequently and each family took turns answering. Not knowing which family was being called, I answered one of these calls later on that day. An operator spoke. "Would you accept a collect call from Roger in Spain?" I was very much surprised and accepted the charge without thinking about the fact that I was not on my own phone. (To this day I do not know how the collect call made it through to the waiting room.)

Roger recalls:

I was two months into the four-month study in Spain program. I was going to bed at my host family's apartment when Jody came over and said she had received a phone call from our program director. Jody was another participant staying at a host family who had a phone. The director called her because she was closest to me. Mom had called the chaplain at Calvin College, who in turn contacted the program director at her hotel room. She called Jody who walked over to my house.

It was 11:30 p.m. She said, “Your sister has been in an accident,” nothing more. For some reason, I immediately thought of Anita and feared the worst. All I had was a phone number for a waiting room at the hospital. I dressed and quickly walked over to Jody’s host family. I realized I had to talk them into letting me make a collect call. I wondered how to allay their nervous fears of huge phone bills. The unfriendly Spanish phone company often inflicted costs to their customers with no explanation. I really doubted it would work, calling an anonymous phone in a nondescript waiting room and asking, “Would you accept a collect call from Roger in Spain?” My mother picked up the phone! The chain of communication alone shows God’s provision in the times we most need it.

Roger was torn about what to do. He felt he should be with our family, but knew it would be hard to make a trans-Atlantic trip in the middle of a study program. We decided he should stay and we set up times to make phone calls and get updates. Some of his program partners thought it was the wrong decision, and he expressed to us later that at times he felt selfish about it.

Sometime during that afternoon a minister friend, who was also Ron’s bowling partner, arrived. (Monday morning was bowling league time for some of the ministers of the Holland area. We had asked Carrie’s mother to inform Ron’s friends at the bowling alley that Ron would not be there today because of Nola’s accident.) Hank, our pastor friend, sat with us for a long time while we waited. He did not say anything that we can remember, but his presence there was very comforting. It was a lesson in the ministry of unspoken consolation that we will never forget.

It was 5:00 p.m. when we were finally told that Nola was in the intensive care unit. A team of doctors took us aside and gave us their report. Nola had sustained some facial cuts, which had been sewed up, and she had a broken collarbone that would be dealt with later. The most immediate concern, however, was her closed head injury. The CAT Scan showed that she had bruising on both sides of the brain and on the cortex (the top part of the brain). No surgery was anticipated since there was no bleeding to stop.

The doctors had drilled a hole through Nola's skull and placed a monitor to measure the pressure the brain would put against the skull. Pressure against the skull could cause further damage to the brain. If there was too much pressure the brain would have nowhere to go but to push against the spinal column and this would cause death. The next three to four days would be critical as the swelling increased. All the doctors could do would attempt to control the swelling by giving Nola a drug called manitol. The manitol would drain fluid from the body, including the brain, and give the brain more room to swell.

We were given permission to go into ICU and be with Nola for a period of five minutes every hour. Only immediate family members would be allowed to go in, two at one time.

The doctors had tried to tell us what to expect but there was no way we could be fully prepared for seeing our own daughter in ICU. She was connected from head to toe to tubes, wires and life support of every imaginable kind. The right side of her face and her right eye were swollen. Cuts on her right ear and on her chin had been stitched. We felt helpless. We wanted to get close to give Nola a hug, but we're prevented by the delicate equipment monitoring her and sustaining her life. The only thing we could do was take Nola's hand and hold it. Hoping she might be able to hear us, we talked to her, even though this was very awkward.

I remember taking some comfort in the fact that Nola was not in pain. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully. There was no struggle. This was not true of the patient nearby, who appeared to be experiencing intense suffering. The respirator was controlling Nola's breathing. The only sensation we could feel was a slight grasping with her hand, an automatic reflex to our touch. A nurse explained this as being similar to a baby's spontaneous grabbing of a finger. She did not consider it a sign of meaningful brain activity. To us, however, it was a grasp of hope, the only meaningful connection we had with our severely injured daughter.

We had expected to see Nola's head completely shaved, but only the front bang section had been shaved for placement of the monitor. The rest of her hair had not been touched. Small pieces of glass still clung to it.

After a few minutes in ICU that day my emotions started to surface and the reality of what had happened began to hit me. I wanted to stay but I needed to leave. A specially trained nurse sat near the foot end of Nola's bed and kept taking notes on all that was occurring. She assured us she would stay right there with Nola for her entire shift. If any emergency arose, she would call a doctor immediately.

Back in the waiting room Anita's boyfriend Tim brought us hamburgers to eat. We had not even thought about eating all day, but he knew we needed nourishment. We appreciated the food, the fact we did not have to leave to get it, and most of all, his thoughtfulness.

Visitors began to arrive—relatives, friends, members of our church, and Nola's high school friends. What strength we drew from their presence and their concern!

Over the next two weeks the waiting room would become our living room. The strength we received from visitors would overflow and help others who were experiencing their own critical situations. Some of them did not have the support that we had. For several years we would keep in contact with one woman whose husband died during those days. She later told us that she returned to the fellowship of her own church as a result of what she witnessed among our group of supporters.

To order a copy of this
book...

Please visit
<http://nola.spruk.com>

or send an email to
ronspruk@juno.com