



Leah Batchelor with her mum Allison.

'God has walked with me' says inspirational Leah

The fact that 23-year-old Leah Batchelor will embark on her third year studies at the University of Ulster in September is nothing short of a miracle.

For just 20 months ago Leah was in intensive care, conscious of all that was going on around her, feeling pain and emotion, yet not able to move a single muscle apart from her eyelids.

This beautiful and bubbly young lady had suffered a massive aneurysm that left her with a rare condition known as locked in syndrome. Doctors said she would never walk, talk or even breathe by herself again.

But with the prayers of her family, friends, her parish of St Michael's, Belfast, and even strangers around the world, Leah fought back.

And in March BBC Northern Ireland's 'Story of a Lifetime' portrayed the

tremendous courage of a young lady who never lost her faith and now thanks God that she is where she is.

"In the early days I was angry with God. I could not understand why this happened, but then I knew that I needed God beside me to help me on the journey," Leah said.

Her speech is difficult to understand. She is slowly learning to talk and walk again. Her right arm is paralysed and she has to do with her left hand everything she once did with her right. She is still beautiful and her smile lights up a room.

The aneurysm struck when Leah, a lifelong parishioner of St Michael's and a dedicated member of the Girls' Brigade at

St Mary's, Ballybeen, was bag packing in a supermarket to raise funds for a GB trip to South Africa.

"I have always had migraines, but as I was packing the bags I felt dizzy and my eyes were blurry," Leah recalled.

She was violently ill and was soon in an ambulance on her way to the Ulster Hospital where she rapidly deteriorated. Her parents Allison and Thomas called the rector of St Michael's, the Ven Barry Dodds, former Archdeacon of Belfast, who was at the family's side immediately.

"It was so painful to see her body closing down in just a couple of hours," said Barry. "Her condition became so serious she lost consciousness and they had to put her on life support.

"Leah was taken to the Royal where they discovered the aneurysm had devastated all the cells around her brain stem. She could retain all her memory and intelligence functions but her brain no longer had a path to tell other parts of her body to move."

Leah was put in an induced coma. When she was brought round the only things she could move were her eyelids. An operation on the aneurysm was ruled out because of the risk that Leah would bleed to death.

"I told them to operate and let her go," admits Allison. "The thought of Leah who was so vibrant and so full of life being only able to move her eyelids was the worst possible thing that could happen."

Leah had also considered death to be preferable to a locked in life. "I wanted people to pray that I would die," she said. "I felt like I was alive inside a dead body, but that body could still feel pain and I could not tell anyone about it.

"I prayed that God would either let me die or give me a sign to keep fighting."

That sign came six weeks after Leah's collapse. Barry recalls the moment he not only heard but saw the news. "Leah moved her little finger. Her mum caught this on her mobile phone and sent it to me. It was incredible," he said.

Leah was no longer locked in. Yet Allison explained that a hole left in Leah's head should not allow signals to go from the brain to the body. "The doctors cannot explain it. Without a shadow of a doubt it is a miracle," she said.

Leah was moved to the Stroke Ward at the Royal and later to Musgrave Park Hospital for rehabilitation. From there her determination and courage have been astounding.



Barry Dodds looks on as Leah Batchelor takes tentative steps during her physiotherapy.

"You can pray to God to make you better, but you also need to put in the effort yourself," said Leah. "I had prayed for a sign and when I got that sign I knew I had to work at it."

That first Christmas, she was given an iPad. "I was able to use it to text with my left hand, and all of a sudden I was able to communicate. I became part of the outside world again," Leah recalls.

Last August she defied expectations and went on the GB trip to South Africa with Allison as her carer. "I never doubted that I would go to South Africa," Leah said. "When I was there I did everything the others did. We worked in a crèche where we played with the children and did crafts and dancing. I also designed a mural for the others to paint."

Leah can now walk 15 metres without support, but full mobility is still some way away. "She doesn't just have to build up the strength in her muscles but has to teach her brain to tell the muscles what to do," said Alison.

She has regular speech therapy and physiotherapy. In September Leah will return to University to complete her graphic design degree.

Every Sunday she walks into St Michael's Parish Church. She believes that God has been walking with her and her family.

Barry describes Leah as an exceptional young lady. "She has been a wonderful inspiration to many people. She has a can-do spirit," he said. The former archdeacon is planning to abseil down the Europa Hotel in Belfast in September to raise funds for Leah's specialist treatment.

Preserving the past for the future at St Patrick's, Ballymena

Major work has been carried out to secure the tower of St Patrick's Church, Ballymena, and to replace some of the stone work throughout the building.

The bell ringing chamber and the organ loft needed to be protected against the elements. The project received a grant of £71,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

One of the last remaining 'Seven Towers of Ballymena,' the parish visitors' book reveals that it attracts tourists from all over the world.

The rector, the Rev Canon Stuart Lloyd said: "Visitors admire the beauty and atmosphere of St Patrick's and comment favourably on its upkeep. Parishioners appreciate the fine building they have inherited but also acknowledge the responsibility placed upon them to maintain it to a high standard for future parishioners

and for the wider community."

Cannon Lloyd expressed his thanks to everyone who had worked so hard to get this work off the ground and had contributed generously to the restoration appeal. "I have been very encouraged by the response and I'd also like to extend my thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund for seeing our vision and getting behind it," Canon Lloyd said.

Paul Mullan, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland, said: "Places of worship are at the heart of many local communities and it is hugely important that these historic buildings are preserved for future generations to use and enjoy."



Valerie Ash (centre) is pictured following her commissioning as Connor MU President with the Rev Elizabeth Hanna (extreme left) and Alison Skillen who were also commissioned as office-bearers in Connor MU. With them is Bishop Alan Abernethy and the Rev Mark Taylor, rector of Whitehead, Mrs Ash's home parish.

Commissioning of Connor MU President

Valerie Ash was commissioned as Diocesan President of Connor Mothers' Union (MU) by the Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev Alan Abernethy, at the MU Diocesan Festival Service in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast.

Also commissioned were the Rev Elizabeth Hanna, rector of St Nicholas, Belfast, to serve as Diocesan Faith and Policy Unit Coordinator and Alison Skillen

as South Belfast Area Chair.

MU office-bearers and members from across the diocese were present in the cathedral, as was the newly-commissioned MU All Ireland President, Phyllis Grothier.

The new Diocesan President, a parishioner at Whitehead, succeeds Moira Thom who was Diocesan President for six years.