

Miraculous Love

WHEN TOMPKINS HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER LESLIE HORNE HESSEL WAS IN A LIFE-THREATENING CAR ACCIDENT TWO WEEKS BEFORE HER WEDDING, SHE BECAME DETERMINED TO SURVIVE AND MARRY THE LOVE OF HER LIFE

Written by Kennan Buckner | Photography by Distinctive Photography

The couple exchanged vows on their original date, February 13, 2015, but rescheduled their large ceremony for June 2016



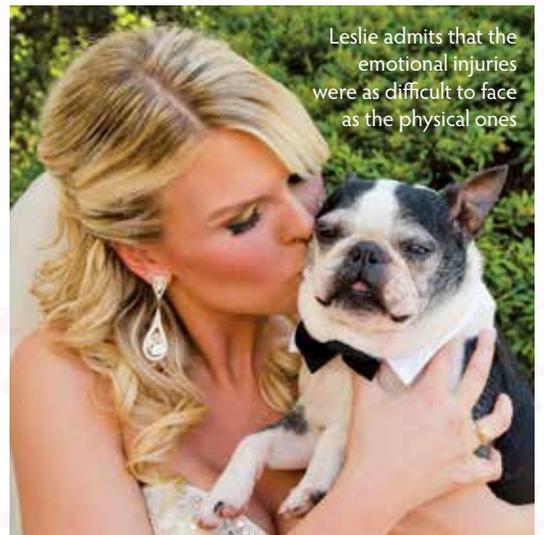
Two weeks before their wedding, Leslie was in a near fatal car accident



Leslie wore a Maggie Sottero gown



Their wedding was held at Ashton Gardens



Leslie admits that the emotional injuries were as difficult to face as the physical ones

Two weeks before Tompkins High School chemistry teacher, Leslie Horne Hessel, was set to marry her then fiancé Ronnie Hessel, she was in a horrific accident that nearly took her life. Doctors told her that others with similar injuries simply do not make it. Leslie went into survival mode motivated by the power of true love.

THE COLLISION

On January 30, 2015, Leslie was driving to a friend's house in Magnolia. Due to the nature of the accident, she doesn't remember much about that day. "I was alone," she says. "I remember leaving work at the end of the school day, going home to change clothes, texting Jen before I left, and that's it. I don't even remembering getting in my car to leave."

Leslie's Civic collided with a truck pulling a loaded horse trailer on FM 2920 near Hockley. She sustained severe head trauma, nerve compression on the left side of her face, a shattered middle ear, and a ruptured eardrum. She was quickly life-flighted to Memorial Hermann Hospital and put in a medically induced coma for the first 24 hours. Her fiancé, Ronnie, was notified after someone at the hospital did a little social networking and recognized her face from a Facebook post of Ronnie's. They told him to come immediately, but didn't share any details of Leslie's condition. "The first time I saw her, I was shocked," Ronnie says. "I couldn't believe this was happening."

BATTLING INJURIES

Leslie's life changed in an instant, both physically and emotionally. "Before the accident, I was in the best shape of my life," she says. "I had trained with a personal trainer at my gym to get in wedding shape, and I had just visited my hair dresser to get the perfect shade of long blonde hair in preparation for my wedding in two weeks."

But when Leslie woke up, her head was shaved and she was bone-thin. "It is one thing to fight physical injuries, but another to emotionally battle being stripped of your physical identity at the peak of your life," says Leslie. "I spent a good part of age 27 and 28 wearing a wig every day." She was put on steroids to reduce inflammation in her face. In rehab, she did facial exercises to help the nerves regenerate. She also wore a hearing aid until having surgery in November 2015 to repair her middle ear.

A NEW FAIRYTALE

Leslie was released from the hospital two days before their originally planned wedding day, February 13, 2015. So the couple decided to postpone their original wedding at

Ashton Gardens and held a small ceremony at their home with immediate family. "We were legally married in front of our fireplace at the home we built together," says Leslie. "I wore jeans and a white hoodie that said, 'Bride' on the back in rhinestones. I had no makeup on and a shaved head."

Through her recovery process, Ronnie has stood by her side. "I cannot explain how much it means to understand that Ronnie made the choice to marry me at my very worst. That is love," says Leslie. "Ronnie and I got to experience tragedy early, and it strengthened and changed our relationship forever."

Leslie finally got to walk down the aisle with adoring family and friends on June 23, 2016, three years to the day after Ronnie's proposal. "I wore my dream wedding dress and shoes, my hair and makeup were professionally done, I had gorgeous flowers, and I looked like the bride I originally wanted to be," says Leslie. "The venue and flowers were absolutely stunning, and it was everything I imagined."

Ronnie and Leslie realize how precious time is and plan to spend it laughing and enjoying life. "Marriage is not just about sharing the good times together, it is also about sharing the bad, for better or worse," says Ronnie. "We just got some of the worst out of the way early."

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HOPE AND HEALING

The couple credits the support of their Katy friends and family for giving them hope. Some of Leslie's fellow teachers even donated their sick days to help offset the two-and-a-half months she wasn't able to work. "It means the world to me," says Leslie. "The chemistry teachers I previously taught with at Seven Lakes High School sent me gift cards to restaurants so I would not have to worry about cooking for a while. One of my coworkers, Megan, drove me to and from school when I returned to Tompkins since I did not have a vehicle."

Leslie reminds others who are struggling that, "God is always available to talk to, even when you do not want to share your emotions with others." These days, she spends much of her time in the car in prayer. "I have peace that God kept me here for a reason, and I have a lot of work to do here before my time is done," she says. "It is easy to love someone at their very best, but they need you most at their very worst. It is at that time when marriages fall apart. Ronnie and I understand that family sticks together and takes care of one another, no matter what." **KM**

KENNAN BUCKNER celebrated her six-year anniversary with her husband Marcus in October.



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