

Survivor of terrorist bombing gives thanks

By Elizabeth Lowe

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CATONSVILLE - Emily Kerstetter is living proof that miracles happen.

Kerstetter, 18, attributes her surviving a July 2010 synchronized terrorist bombing in Uganda to her “guardian angel.”

A Ugandan man - she never learned his name - applied pressure to her wounds and helped transport her to a van headed to a hospital. She attributed her right leg not being amputated to her young age and doctors in South Africa who “worked miracles.”

Kerstetter, who sustained a compound fracture to her right leg and other serious injuries to her right arm and ear from the explosion, has had 28 surgeries. The most recent was May 29, three days after her graduation from Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville.

“Being able to graduate with my class is pretty amazing,” said Kerstetter, an A-student and a member of the National Honor Society. “I’m so relieved. A weight is lifted.”

In July 2010, Kerstetter was on a mission trip with her grandmother and a group from a Methodist church in Pennsylvania when Kampala, the capital of Uganda, was rocked by a bombing believed to be the doing of al-Shabaab, a group linked to al-Qaida.

Kerstetter was at an Ethiopian restaurant watching soccer’s World Cup when the

terrorists struck.

“Everyone in my group was injured,” said Kerstetter, a parishioner of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City. “I was injured considerably worse.”

She was not supposed to be in Uganda, as Kerstetter, her grandmother and four others on the mission added an extra week to the two-week trip.

“We were having a great time, doing a lot of outreach at churches,” said Kerstetter, an Ellicott City resident. “No one wanted to leave.”

Kerstetter spent about a day at a hospital in Uganda; a month at one in Johannesburg; three more months at Johns Hopkins Hospital; then another month at the Kennedy Krieger Institute. Finally discharged, she still faced months of recovery and physical therapy.

“Every time I went in (for surgery), I thought I would come out and not have a leg,” Kerstetter said. “It was very hard learning to adapt to my new disabilities.”

She doesn’t take “simple daily things” – like washing her hair or standing in the shower – for granted.

“Thank you God for letting me be able to stand up in the shower,” Kerstetter said.

From the bombing until June 2011, Kerstetter had to use a wheelchair for mobility. She began walking again in December. She has chronic pain in her right ankle, but no longer takes narcotic medication or attends physical therapy. She wears a compression stocking on her right leg and a brace to ease pain and provide stability.

Kerstetter has felt “a little bit of resentment,” wondering why people had to die in the attack and why this happened to her.

“It really hurts to recognize this happened,” said Kerstetter, who deals with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Throughout the ordeal, however, she has drawn strength from her faith – and her faith communities.

After the attack, Kerstetter said she continued to pray the rosary and wear her Miraculous Medal.

“At first I think my faith was something I clung to very eagerly,” Kerstetter said. “It’s definitely made my faith stronger.”

Three days after the bombing, the Mount de Sales Academy community gathered to pray for Kerstetter’s recovery. A friend held a swim-a-thon at her swim club’s pool and fundraisers were held during the 2010-2011 school year to raise money to defray her medical expenses.

“It was good to have that support,” Kerstetter said. “It felt nice to have a solid community to ask for help. That’s what I think is so great about these Catholic institutions – the love and the help.”

Judi Lanciotti, Mount de Sales’ vice principal of student affairs, said the school community has “been blessed by grace” during Kerstetter’s recovery.

“I think its touched our hearts in a positive way,” Lanciotti said. “God has a reason for everything.”

In January 2011, Kerstetter finally was able to begin her junior year coursework from home. In spring 2011, she went to school for two or three hours a day, when able, and completed her junior year studies in summer 2011. She returned to school full-time last September.

“I had to give everything up to God,” Kerstetter said. “It was really through the help of everyone at the school I was able to finish my coursework and stay on track.”

Dominican Sister of St. Cecilia Anne Catherine Burleigh, principal of Mount de Sales, said Kerstetter’s recovery is through “God’s grace.”

“There’s no question in my mind,” Sister Anne Catherine said. “She has tenacity. It’s a miracle she’s alive, a miracle she’s walking.”

Kerstetter has another surgery scheduled in August. For now, she needs to remain close to home and will attend Howard Community College in the fall, with nursing

and journalism among her interests.

Kerstetter aspires to be a nurse midwife and travel to underdeveloped countries - albeit not as dangerous as Uganda - to teach women about health care and write about her experiences.

"I still want to do mission work," Kerstetter said. "It's something I feel called to continue."

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