

Posted on Sat, Oct. 01, 2011

Crash survivor to run in late wife's honor

BY AMY RENEE LEIKER

The Wichita Eagle

After more than 50 surgeries, Jared Estes says he's in good shape. Now the surgeries are optional. The Wichita resident always wears a sleeve and glove to protect the thin skin doctors grafted onto his right arm and hand after a car crash that killed his wife and burned 50 percent of his body.

Estes, 32, hopes that by December, his hair will be nearly filled in. Right now, he tucks the shaggy brown locks beneath a hat, even when he runs.

"I'll be out of hats for the first time in seven years," Estes said, laughing. "It'll be crazy to feel the sun on my head."

Estes says running was an integral part of the years he's spent recovering — and one of the reasons the foundation Estes founded to remember his late wife, Paige Estes, is sponsoring the second annual Fun Run and Walk at the Prairie Fire Marathon, held Oct. 8 and 9 in Wichita.

It's the sort of event Paige — nicknamed Smiles — would have enjoyed, Estes said.

"With Paige being such a positive person and with this being such a positive event ... everything just fit together perfectly."

Proceeds from the Paige Estes Memorial Fun Run and Walk will benefit the Via Christi Regional Burn Center, where Estes spent five months in in-patient care after the accident.

Estes said he fell in love with Paige the night she announced the winner of the Bucklin High School homecoming king and read the wrong name. Estes, a senior, actually won the crown. He drove around Bucklin later that night explaining to Paige, a junior, that her flub didn't matter.

"I always swear that I fell in love with her right there," Estes said. "After that, we were pretty much inseparable."

He hid her engagement ring in a packet of strawberry Fun Dip candy and proposed to her on Myrtle Beach. And he started training to run his first marathon, to be held in April 2005 in Kanopolis.

Six months after their September 2004 wedding, a drunk driver speeding in excess of 120 mph slammed his Porsche into the back of the Estes' Toyota on Kellogg near West Street. The Estes' car smashed into a retaining wall and burst into flames.

Paige, 23, died at the scene.

"It was just this feeling like somebody scooped out your insides," said Estes, who heard the news of his wife's death after waking from a medically induced coma more than a week after her funeral. "Like this really hollow feeling knowing that the one voice that could make everything OK is the one voice you'll never hear again."

Estes began a remarkable physical recovery, thanks to nurses and a Via Christi occupational therapist named Mike Reynolds — nicknamed MacGyver for his creativity in rigging devices to help Estes regain use of his atrophied body.

When he met Reynolds, Estes said he "couldn't even pick up a Cheerio." His legs "just crumbled" the first time nurses made him walk.

A little more than a year after the car accident, the pair ran a race at the Kanopolis marathon.

"If you know Jared at all, you realize he's not normal in a lot of ways," Reynolds said. "Patients have two decisions: recover or lie around in self-pity. ... Jared always set up challenges for himself so he could achieve more and more."

On Oct. 9, Estes will join participants in the Paige Estes Memorial Fun Walk and Run instead of running another marathon. Estes says the sponsorship is his way of honoring his late wife, paying back Via Christi staff and ensuring other burn victims have a second chance at life.

"It's neat to get out there and watch people helping people," Estes said. "In the end, that's what life is all about."

Reach Amy Renee Leiker at 316-268-6644 or aleiker@wichitaeagle.com.

© 2011 Wichita Eagle and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansas.com>

[Read more here: http://www.kansas.com/2011/10/01/v-print/2040391/to-help-burn-victims.html#storylink=cpy](http://www.kansas.com/2011/10/01/v-print/2040391/to-help-burn-victims.html#storylink=cpy)