

## A Life Slowly Put Back in Tune

**M**atthew Morgan plays lead guitar in a rock band called Danger. It's a prophetic name, given that in February the mop-headed 11-year-old collided with a car while riding a skateboard near his Potomac home.

Maybe if the band's name had been Caution or Safety or Prudence. But, no, it's Danger, and when Matt's mom, Karen Morgan, learned just how seriously he had been injured — how close to death he was, how hard a battle he had in front of him — she did the sort of cosmic horse-trading that any parent would do.

Just wake up, she said to Matt as he lay comatose in the intensive care unit at Children's Hospital, and Dad and I will buy you a new electric guitar.

"The things you say to a kid to get them out of a coma," Karen told me.

If the brain is a massive assortment of filing cabinets, each drawer filled with information-packed folders, then Matt's cabinets had been upended, the folders violently tossed about. When his unhelmeted head struck the pavement or the vehicle, he suffered what doctors call a diffuse axonal injury.

The human brain, said Dr. Robert Keating, chief of neurosurgery at Children's Hospital, is the consistency of week-old Jell-O. Bathed in fluid and protected by the bony vault of the skull, it can withstand some shock. But rapid deceleration causes "shearing": Nerves are stretched; some are broken.

When Matt arrived at the Children's emergency unit, he had the distinct posturing of someone with severe brain trauma: elbows pulled in, arms splayed out.

Matt was in a coma for 13 days. Karen and her husband, Thomas, put guitar picks in Matt's hands, a reminder of his life before the accident, talismans for the future. The doctors and nurses at Children's watched Matt constantly, putting a tube in his skull to monitor pressure and relieve any that had built up. Drugs put his body in a suspended state to aid in healing.

On TV, comatose people just wake up — poof! In reality, it's an arduous process. Matt did wake up, slowly. His eyes opened, but they had a flat, unknowing gaze. It was time for rehab, first at Children's, then at the National Rehabilitation Hospital next door. He had to learn to do the most

basic things all over again: speak, walk, swallow.

"Believe it or not, there's a 'swallow team,'" said Karen. Matt graduated when he was able to swallow water, a thin and potentially dangerous substance.

"It was like having a 70-pound newborn," Karen said.

As with a newborn, Matt was something of a blank slate: What sort of child would emerge from the coma? When Karen first made him his favorite pancakes, he asked, "Why did you make me this?"

But every day more of the pre-accident Matt emerges. To see him now, he looks like any other rambunctious, Led Zep-loving kid.

For the first five days Matt was in the ICU, it was touch-and-go. When Dr. Keating finally told the Morgans that their son would live but that it was possible he might be impaired, Karen said that didn't matter.

"That is the reality check," she said, "that you don't love your child because they play lacrosse or they make the honor roll. All those things are no longer important."

Said Dr. Keating: "In the long run, he should get over this."

On March 18 — 38 days after the accident, on the way home from the hospital — Matt went with his parents to the Guitar Center store in Rockville and played the solo from "Stairway to Heaven" on a Gibson Les Paul in classic sunburst finish, his new guitar.

"It was when I was set free," he said.

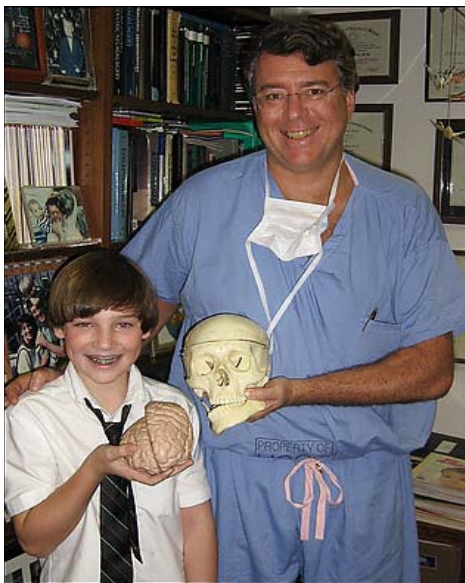
### Supporting Children's

The Morgans were lucky. Their insurance covered Matt's treatment. But every day kids without insurance arrive at Children's, in the back of an ambulance or, like Matt, in the belly of a helicopter. They receive the same treatment as anyone else. No one is ever turned away.

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BY JOHN KELLY — THE WASHINGTON POST

Matthew Morgan, 11, who is recovering from a brain injury, and Dr. Robert Keating, chief of neurosurgery at Children's.