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'He would be so proud'

With Comatose Officer Near Death, Friends and Strangers Rally Around Family

By Patrick Vuong

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A small fleet of Harley-Davidson motorcycles sat glistening in the sun outside Checkered Flag Pizza.

Inside, the brawny, tattooed bikers plunked down and ordered a round of sodas.

Wearing vests covered in patches and insignias, the six Southern California police officers were at the Beach Boulevard restaurant because of one person: Tyler Pinchot. The 45-year-old Buena Park motorcycle officer was critically injured on duty June 13 when a car hit him from behind on Orangethorpe Avenue.

Pinchot's condition has rapidly deteriorated in recent weeks, and his feeding tube was removed Sept. 8. He remains in a coma, and there's little hope that he'll survive.

The officers who gathered at Checkered Flag Pizza are members of the Choir Boys Law Enforcement Motorcycle Club. They are among hundreds of people who have reached out to the two-time Officer of the Year, praying for his recovery and raising more than \$3,000 for his family. Though the six club members do not know Pinchot personally, they have embraced him as their brother.

"We take the people's emotions and try to harness it," Choir Boys co-founder Jay Ellsworth said of the group's fund-raising efforts for Pinchot and other injured officers in California, Arizona, Nevada and Texas. "We've organized so that when something happens to an officer, we can be a force to help the family."

Michael Keener, general manager of Checkered Flag Pizza, where Pinchot was a regular customer, was stunned by the response.

"Everything we've asked for from the community, they've given to us," he said.

The Buena Park Police Department has been flooded with calls, e-mails and cards since the accident.

"I don't think he knows how many lives he's touched," said Pinchot's wife, Susie

Snider- Pinchot. "I think he would be so proud to see so many people rally financially."

Project 999, an aid program created by the Orange County Sheriff's Advisory Council, has paid her salary so she could take leave from her job and be at Pinchot's hospital bedside. Meanwhile, Buena Park officers swing by Pinchot's Orange home each week to cut the lawn, vacuum and dust the house, or cook meals for Susie and her son from a previous marriage, Scott Snider, 17.

"It's amazing to see how many people are calling the department," said Susie's oldest child, Stephanie Snider, 20, who recently returned home from Sunnyvale to be with her stepfather. "They're asking 'How can we help? Can we make you dinner?' And they don't even know him."

Loving support

Just before midnight Wednesday, Susie, 47, stroked her husband's hair and kissed him on the forehead.

She did not take the good- night kiss for granted, knowing that on any evening it could be the last. His doctors at UCI Medical Center told Susie on Monday to prepare for the worst.

"I don't know how prepared you can be," said Susie, her eyes red from exhaustion and tears. "It's kind of scary."

Two weeks ago, Pinchot's body began rejecting the nutrition being fed to him through a stomach tube.

Susie decided to stop the feeding Sept. 8 because of the reaction, the prognosis that the feeding problem would continue and Pinchot's long-held wish that he not be resuscitated if he was ever incapacitated.

For the past 97 days, a steady stream of well-wishers has poured into Pinchot's hospital room in Orange. Among the visitors are Doug and Charlynn Miller, his friends of more than 20 years.

"It's been hell," Charlynn Miller said. "But he's got the best wife. She's the best thing that happened to him."

The real deal

His co-workers aren't surprised by the public response.

His 4-inch-thick personnel file is padded by 123 letters of commendation - the most among Buena Park officers, police Chief Gary Hicken said.

"Sometimes people talk about other people more flatteringly than they really lived their lives," Hicken said. "But Tyler's the real deal."

In 1992, Pinchot saved a suicidal woman from leaping off the Western Avenue bridge over the Santa Ana (I-5) Freeway. He wrapped his body around hers and pinned her to the chain-link fence until firefighters arrived to lower them into a rescue basket.

And he's the only Buena Park cop to consecutively win the Officer of the Year Award - in 1991 and 1992.

Pinchot was a tireless volunteer: Special Weapons and Tactics team member, Explorer Post adviser, Station-House Santa Claus, unofficial department photographer and a tactical officer at Fullerton College's police reserve academy.

Raised in Garden Grove and Orange, he graduated from Golden West College's police program in 1979. He was an officer at Rancho Santiago College for a year before joining the Buena Park force in 1980.

Close to the heart

Since the accident, Susie has slept with Pinchot's badge under her pillow. His wedding band, several sizes too big for her to wear, is kept on a chain around her neck.

Susie met Pinchot through his mother, Sally, her co- worker at Citizens Business Bank in Orange. The couple had their first lunch date five years ago Thursday. Both divorced, they slowly fell in love and married May 18, 2002.

They knew the risks of his being a cop, especially a motorcycle officer, but Susie never asked him to change assignments.

"He absolutely loved what he did, and I'd never take that away from him," she said.

They had been husband and wife for slightly more than a year when, on June 13, Pinchot was using a radar gun to catch speeders on Orangethorpe Avenue.

California Highway Patrol spokesman Garry Goldenberg said Pinchot observed a

violator and pulled out of a driveway in pursuit.

A car driven by a 74-year-old Buena Park man rear-ended Pinchot's motorcycle, throwing him into the air and slamming his body to the pavement. In less than 15 minutes, a helicopter was flying him to UCI Medical Center.

The aftershock

Though he was writhing in pain from a fractured pelvis, punctured lung and head injuries, Pinchot's concerns at the hospital were not for himself, Susie said. He asked whether the other driver was OK, then apologized to his wife and Hicken, the police chief, for getting hurt.

"That was the miracle - that we got to talk to him and reassure him that everything was OK," Susie said.

After doctors operated on his pelvis and pulled him out of a chemical-induced coma, they realized that his head injuries were more severe.

"As time went on it rippled through his brain and scrambled everything it touched," Stephanie Snider said.

Friends and colleagues marvel at the Pinchot family's resolve. Susie said she's remained strong through the weeks, often using humor to ease her anxieties and relying on relatives and friends from church, work and the police department to cope with her husband's decline.

"I do not want him to drown in his own bile and die," she said, referring to his body's rejection of the feeding tube. "I would rather have him take his last breath and die peacefully.

"I know we're giving him wings to be free. That's what I'd rather have."