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Highway cost Mark Raddatz his wife, his health and YEARS OF PAIN

Perfect summer day turned into nightmare as white car pulled out

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EAGLE LAKE — Mark Raddatz remembers feeling good as he drove his wife and son back to Eagle Lake following a Saturday afternoon family get-together near New Ulm. And he remembers there were few cars on Highway 14.

“We had a wonderful day,” Raddatz said. “... And there really wasn’t much traffic for that time of the day. Really minimal traffic.”

But on the two-lane stretch of highway between Nicollet and North Mankato, three vehicles were plenty to change a wonderful day into the worst day of his life.

“ There was nothing that let me anticipate there was going to be an accident. Nothing at all.”

He was driving east, his 59-year- old wife, Patty, beside him, his 34-year- old son, Eric, in the back seat. A minivan was coming from the opposite direction, and the driver of a white car was at the intersection, looking to pull into the westbound lane.

There was nothing ominous about it. It’s a sight an experienced driver has seen thousands of times. And thousands of times, the driver looking to enter the highway waits until the lane is clear of approaching traffic.

This time the white car pulled out.

The minivan swerved to avoid rearending the car. But instead of swerving into the relatively flat ditch to her right, she swerved into the left lane.



For Mark Raddatz of Eagle Lake, a head-on crash on Highway 14 in 2008 resulted in more than a dozen surgeries, weeks in the Hennepin County Medical Center and months of physical therapy. He's willing to share all of the agonizing memories — except for one that remains too painful to talk about.



Photos by John Cross

Crash statistics tell a conflicting story of Highway 14 between New Ulm and North Mankato, which has an unusually high percentage of heavy trucks. Overall crash rates are below the norm, but the fatal crash rate is nearly double the statewide average for rural two-lane highways.

PAIN: ' Let everything heal and then start over'

“ The white car pulled out and the minivan came over and that was it,” Raddatz said. “It was a blur. All of a sudden it was there. I did the best I could. There was actually some black marks on the road from me locking up the brakes.”

Months of haze

The hours, even the weeks, that followed are hazy. The rest of 2008 following the July 5 crash is a period dominated by pain and surgeries. And so was much of 2009, with physical therapy and grief counseling added. In 2010, the process continues. With one exception, Raddatz speaks freely and matter-of-factly about everything he went through. He said he's always felt that Highway 14 was an unforgiving stretch of highway going in both directions from his home in Eagle Lake, and he can vividly describe other close calls he's experienced both before and after the 2008 crash.

Even now, Raddatz still drives Highway 14 all the time. As an Eagle Lake resident, it's not like he has much choice. More than virtually anyone else sharing the road, though, he knows that Highway 14 is a place where focus is imperative.

"I always knew it was a bad piece of highway," he said. "I always knew that. ...

All it takes is one little twitch of the wheel and it's over."

But complete focus — a total absence of any mistakes — offers no guarantees.

"You don't have any control over other drivers, what they're doing or not doing."

For the Raddatzes, it was the driver of the white car who was paying no attention to oncoming traffic and the driver of the minivan who reacted by swerving the wrong way.

As the minivan and Raddatz's Buick LeSabre crashed head-on, the white car continued on its way and the driver has never been identified.

Stuck in carnage

"I was jammed between the dashboard and the driver's side door, by the windshield pillar," Raddatz said.

He has a few sketchy memories from the period after the rescue squad arrived from Nicollet.

"About all I can remember is holding my wife's hand and listening to her scream because she was hurt. That was when they were removing her from the car."

It took a long time to get Raddatz out of the mangled vehicle.

"I'd pass out and wake up and pass out and wake up."

He remembers people talking to him, asking him to do things. Once, he was asked to help hold himself up, wrapping the crook of his elbow around the windshield pillar while the rescue crew worked on the seat below to try to free him.

And he remembers a state trooper.

“I remember the trooper telling me my wife had passed away — at the hospital — and I was still in the car,” Raddatz said. “...

Somehow, I think I already knew it.”

There’s a bit of a memory of being moved to the helicopter, of one of the medical crew on the chopper asking him to do something.

“And then I was gone.”

Months in recovery

Transported to Hennepin County Medical Center, Raddatz was listed in critical condition with a broken pelvis, a broken femur and a shattered knee.

His next memory — even the most fleeting one — was two or t hree days away.

Then it was just partial consciousness, the faces of relatives, the incessant physical and mental prodding of doctors.

Raddatz had never had a broken bone in his life, no serious medical problem at all. Now his entire life would be taken over by the efforts to repair his broken body.

“Let everything heal and then start over,” he said, offering a shorthand summary of his new life.

The real experience, though, was endless days of pain, painkillers, procedures, surgeries, therapy, and the frustrating inability to do even the most basic tasks for himself.

That was just the physical side.

“ The hallucinations,” he said. “Oh man, unbelievable.”

He was losing track of where the hallucinations ended and real life began, questioning himself.

The pain and drugs and utter lack of extended sleep messed with his mind. For a long time, there were bloodpressure checks and other tests every hour, night and day.

“And then at 5 o’clock in the morning people would come in, draw blood.

Doctors would start their rounds at 6. And that went on for two months.”

In total, he underwent 11 surgeries at HCMC.

Despite everything that he went through physically, what eventually annoyed him the most about

the hospital stay was the TV. The picture quality was lousy and so was the programming.

“And I couldn’t focus enough to read a book.”

He ended up mainly using the channels that showed peaceful nature scenes aimed at patients needing help relaxing.

‘A dark hole’

As his time at HCMC dragged on, his spirits flagged.

“For me, the longer I was in the hospital, the deeper I got into the hole. You know, a dark hole. That’s the only way I can describe it.”

Raddatz figures a lot of it had to do with what had been lost forever. Patty.

He’d consciously tried to set the grief aside until he was stronger.

“I kept that in the back of my head, in my subconscious, as much as possible because I had to heal, get better. I worried about Eric a lot because he was in a different hospital.”

In hindsight, he said heartache probably can’t be quarantined in that way.

“ You can’t keep it in.”

There were plenty of people trying to help him, therapists, hospital chaplains, his own pastor, friends, co-workers from the Mankato post office, and former Navy buddies from his time in the Navy Reserve and on active duty.

“ That was pretty nice,” he said.

After HCMC got him “put back together reasonably well,” his brother and sister-in-law in Staples took him in for the next phase of his recovery — an alternative to a nursing facility that he welcomed.

Raddatz was there for 2 1/2 months. Home health care workers and physical therapists assisted him with his recovery.

“Getting strength back, learning to function again. I couldn’t do anything for myself for quite a while, even going to the bathroom.”

Back home at last

By mid-November of 2008, he and Eric had returned to their Eagle Lake home. Eric had suffered a severely damaged liver and was still recovering from being bedridden for weeks.

Together, they planned a memorial service for Patty, and they continued healing.

For Raddatz, 2009 brought knee-replacement surgery in September, hipreplacement surgery in December. Physical therapy lasted until March of this year. He figures he might go under the anesthesia one more time for a knee manipulation that would improve the joint's range of motion.

"I'd really like to be able to do things better," he said.

"I will. I'll get there — maybe — before I get too old."

Raddatz, 60, wants more of his independence back.

He can drive, getting in and out of his car without assistance now, but solo fishing trips are still not an option.

"I've got a fishing boat out there and I can't go unless I've got somebody with me, and that really ticks me off. I used to like going out on the water by myself."

His goals at this point are practical, and one tops the list.

"Yeah, to walk without the crutch."

Even in recounting the past two years — years that brought extreme pain, an unending tour of regional health care facilities and the deepest of grief — Raddatz repeatedly talks about what he's thankful for. The rescue crews and officers at the accident scene, the long string of health care professionals, the clinics and therapists, the advances in medicine... .

And he compliments the responsiveness of Blue Cross and Farmers Insurance representatives.

With medical bills for himself and his son each totaled more than \$600,000, Raddatz said it's easy to understand how uninsured or poorly insured people are driven into bankruptcy when they run into health problems.

"Pretty amazing, all the stories you hear about hospitals, insurance companies, law enforcement. They all did a good job."

More than a statistic

Raddatz agreed to talk about his travails partly because he wants Highway 14 to be improved. And he wants people to remember to pay attention to their driving.

He's willing to let his story turn a single highway crash statistic into something more tangible than a number in a data set.

Despite his openness about what he's gone through, however, some questions are off limits. Like

when he's asked if he can talk about how much harder it was to endure the last 25 months without the person who'd been his partner for 37 years.

"No," he answered.

But — as he shook his head and grabbed for a handful of Kleenex — he talked just a bit, around the edges.

"I still have a lot of issues. I'm going to a GriefShare thing every week with people who have lost somebody," he said. "That helps.

It really does."

In reality, no reflection of the physical suffering of Raddatz, or of Eric, or of the four people in the minivan will ever show up on the crash rates for Highway 14.

It's a quirk of the statistics. An accident can't score higher — no matter how many people are hurt — than the score assigned to a fatality. Patty's loss trumps all of the injuries suffered by everyone else that day.