

Unbroken



Three victims of the Boston Marathon bombing are on the road to recovery, thanks to their unwavering family bond. BY JANE BIANCHI

With less than a half-mile left of the Boston Marathon, Carol Downing, 58, was giddy with excitement. For a woman who hadn't taken up running until the age of 40, she was proud to be in the "Super Bowl" of all road races. "I was picking up speed, the adrenaline was pumping and the crowd was getting thicker," says Carol, a retired massage therapist. "I couldn't wait to see my family at the finish line."

All of a sudden, "everything just stopped. I hit a wall of runners. Then I heard sirens," says Carol. She didn't hear the bombs go off, but one of them had exploded less

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From left: Nicole, Erika and Carol in North Carolina.

DAVID A. LAND; HAIR & MAKEUP BY HEATHER HAWKINS AND RHONDA HARRIS FOR ZENOBIA AGENCY; LOCATION COURTESY OF ANNE SPRINGS CLOSE GREENWAY.

than 15 feet from her daughters, Erika Brannock, 30, and Nicole Gross, 32, and Nicole's husband, Michael, 33.

"I remember big flashes of orange and yellow, then I blacked out," says Erika. "When I came to, I smelled burnt metal. I thought, *I need to get up*, then realized that I couldn't. I closed my eyes and had a conversation with God. I told Him, 'I'm not ready to die.'"

Nicole, who was blown about 10 feet from where she had been standing, looked down at her bloody legs and screamed for help. Michael had suffered minor injuries and was frantically searching for his wife and sister-

in-law. "It was like a war scene. I was looking at people through the smoke, but I couldn't see their faces. My brain wasn't functioning at full speed yet," he says.

About 30 minutes after the blast, Michael texted Carol, asking if she was OK and adding: "We were in the bomb. I can't find Nicole and Erika." Carol felt helpless. "Not only did I not know where they were, but I had no idea where I was or how to get around. My husband, Skip—the girls' stepdad—was in Arizona at the time dealing with a family emergency."

Before Carol could figure out what to do next, she got another text from Michael. He'd received a call from a surgeon, who said that

Nicole had been taken to Brigham and Women's Hospital. The runner standing next to Carol—who helped her read the text messages because she didn't have her glasses—walked her to the nearest subway stop. On the way, they met a couple who offered to drive Carol to the hospital. When she arrived, she learned that Nicole had suffered a fractured left tibia and fibula, a nearly severed right Achilles tendon, a 50% perforation in her right eardrum and shrapnel in both legs. "I didn't even cry. It was surreal and too much to absorb. I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience."

And Erika was still missing. "I convinced myself that she was just lost and wandering around. I had to think positive thoughts or else I would have fallen apart," says Carol. Finally, at around 9 p.m. that evening, two FBI agents came to the waiting room and said that Erika was alive and at another Boston hospital a few blocks away. "When I got there, her hair was singed and her face was swollen from all the

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ERIKA

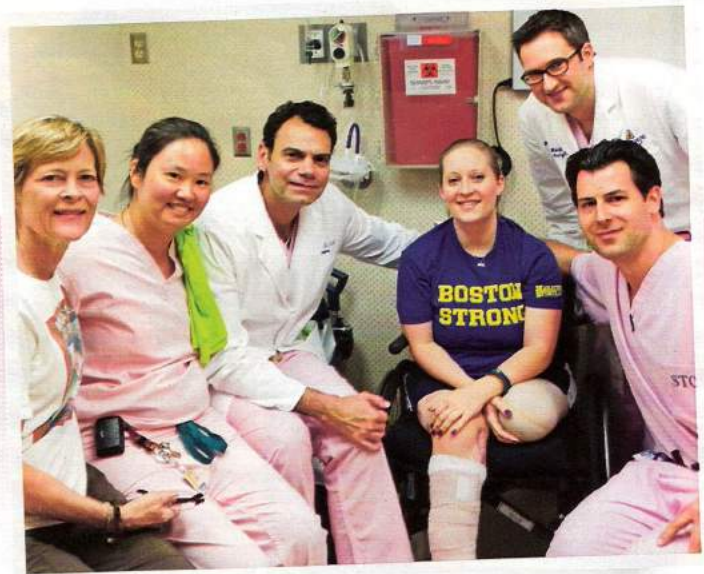
SPREAD, FROM LEFT: NEW YORK DAILY NEWS/GETTY; COURTESY OF CAROL DOWNING, ERIKA BRANNOCK AND NICOLE GROSS (4); COURTESY OF JANE BIANCHI (2).

JOURNEY TO HEALTH

The women turned a tragedy into a way to strengthen their family ties.



Left: Nicole was in newspapers around the world after the marathon. Above: She stayed in the hospital for more than a month.



Erika (with Carol) poses with her medical teams from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and the University of Maryland Shock Trauma Center.

fluids. I had to really look at her until I could finally admit that it was Erika," says Carol. The doctors then shared devastating news: They had amputated her left leg.

When Erika woke up the next day, she tried to speak but couldn't because she was intubated, so she just pointed to her left leg. She motioned for a pen and paper and wrote to Carol: "What happened to my leg?" "I didn't want to upset her and didn't know what to say," says Carol. One of the nurses took Carol's hand and they told her together. "Erika closed her eyes and shook her head. A few tears fell," says Carol. Then Erika, a preschool teacher in Baltimore, wrote: "What do I tell my kids?"

Beginning to heal

Seeing her daughters in so much pain was heartbreaking for Carol as she shuttled back and forth between the two hospitals, but her family was there for support. Skip arrived the day after the bombing, Michael

refused to leave Nicole's side and slept in a chair at the hospital every night, and the girls' father, Wayne, had flown in from Florida.

For the first few days, Carol kept busy to avoid thinking about what had happened. "I liked it better when I was in shock and didn't let myself feel anything." But then, the reality of the situation started to set in. A week after the race, Carol broke down and sobbed for the first time while meeting with the Red Cross about financial assistance. "I just thought, *I can't handle this process*. I was finally ready to grieve, but instead, I had to deal with all of the paperwork."

To try and relieve some of her

stress, Carol started running laps around a pond near the hospital, but it didn't feel right. "I felt really guilty, knowing that my daughters couldn't even walk and I was out running," she says. "But when I told the girls about my attempt, they were encouraging, so I forced myself to keep going."

In mid-May, Carol ventured away from the hospital and went for a run along the Charles River in Boston. At one point, she realized she was close to the spot where she had been stopped during the marathon, so she decided to finish the course on her own. "My heart was racing as I neared the finish line, picturing what it would have felt like if my kids were there. I cried when I was

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CAROL

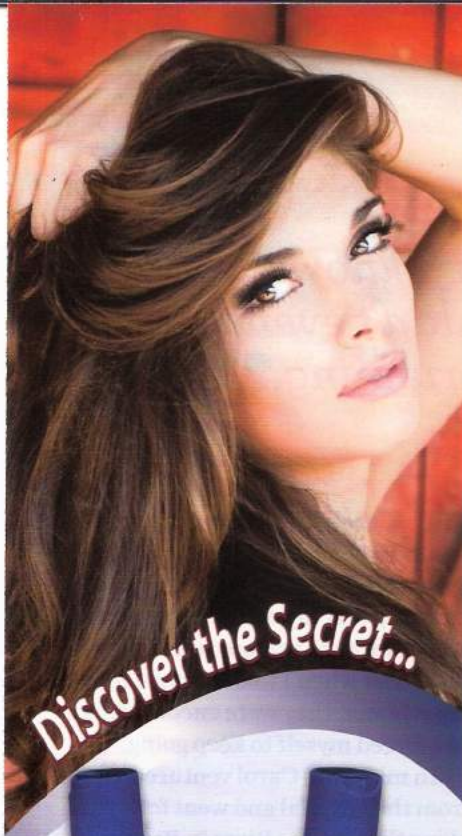


Left: The family kept in touch by video chatting throughout recovery. Top left: Erika with a therapy dog. Above: Erika's college roommate, Bre, also visited often to support her.

Right: Erika, Carol, Michael and Nicole are all smiles after Carol ran a race in November 2013.



Left: Erika walks the last eighth of a mile in the November race with Nicole. It was the farthest she had walked on her prosthetic leg to date.



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done and spent a few minutes at the makeshift memorial, reflecting on how lucky we were to be alive," says Carol. "That moment helped me accept what had happened and refocus on the future."

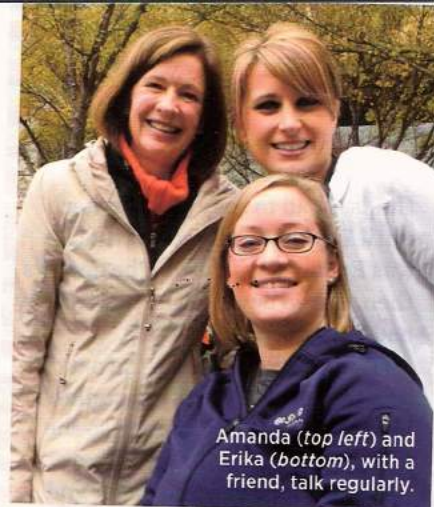
Nicole was released from the hospital after 33 days, and moved back to her home in Charlotte, NC, with Michael. (She took time off from her job as a personal trainer to focus on healing. The former Division I swimmer and two-time Ironman triathlete was determined to exercise again, but had to relearn how to walk first.) On June 18, fifty days after being admitted, Erika was able to leave the hospital. Instead of going back to her apartment in Baltimore and her life as a teacher, Erika moved in with Carol and Skip in Monkton, MD, to continue her recovery.

Moving forward slowly, but as a team

When Erika went home with Carol, it wasn't clear whether she'd be able to walk again. Her right leg was so badly injured that doctors weren't sure if it could support a left prosthetic leg. So Carol and Skip renovated their house to accommodate Erika. They installed an outdoor ramp and an indoor chair lift, and had the entire bathroom redone so Erika could shower and pull her wheelchair up to the vanity.

To stay in touch, Carol and Erika started video chatting with Nicole every few days. Laughter, for Erika, was the best way to cope. "I'd say stuff like, 'Now I can get 50% off pedicures!'" says Erika. "They'd be like, 'Really? You had to say that?'"

As Erika recovered, the three women continued to talk regularly, even addressing tougher emotions. During one conversation, Nicole broke down in tears and shared



Amanda (top left) and Erika (bottom), with a friend, talk regularly.

ERIKA'S GUARDIAN ANGEL

During all of the chaos in Boston, Amanda North, a bystander at the finish line, saw Erika lying on the ground after the bomb went off. "I held her hand, looked into her eyes and said, 'Stay with me. I'm not leaving you.' Then I yelled for help. I thought it was the end of the world. I kept thinking of that passage in *The Lord of the Rings*, where Frodo holds Sam's hand while a volcano erupts around them and says, 'I'm glad that you can be with me here, at the end of all things,'" says Amanda. Carol is grateful that Amanda was there for Erika during a moment she couldn't be—and the family now stays in touch with her and sends regular updates. "I don't think Erika would be here if it weren't for her," says Carol.

how guilty she felt that she'd pushed Erika closer to the finish line to get a better view of the race. "I thought that if I hadn't pushed her in, she wouldn't have lost her leg," says Nicole. "But Mom told me that I may have actually moved Erika out of the way, and Erika said that I possibly saved her life. That conversation changed how I view the whole day."

Carol, too, continues to reconcile her own emotions. "Sometimes I feel like everything

COURTESY OF JANE BIANCHI

is my fault. If I hadn't been running in the marathon, then they wouldn't have gotten hurt," says Carol. "But I believe that this was part of a bigger plan for our family, and I can't waste energy thinking about the what-ifs."

A welcome surprise

In late August, Nicole traveled to Maryland to visit Carol and Erika and accompany them to a medical appointment. The doctor told Erika what she'd been hoping to hear for months: She could be fitted for a prosthetic leg and would be able to walk again. "For all of us to be there when we heard that news made it even more special," says Erika.

On October 4, Erika tried on her prosthesis and walked for the first time since the attack. "For months, we had read about other Boston marathon victims who had gotten their new legs and were already out rock climbing. We were thrilled for them, but wanted the same for Erika. So we decided to turn her appointment into a party. Relatives, physical therapists and friends all came to support her," says Carol. "I'll never forget when she stood up on two legs and told us how good it felt to look someone in the eye again."

Gathering at the finish line again

Nicole encouraged Carol and Erika to come down to Charlotte to participate in a local race in November—she thought it would be a good excuse for them to get together. Nicole waved a flag to start the half- and full marathon,

“My hope is that we meet where I got stopped last time and complete the marathon together.”

CAROL

and Erika wheeled through the 5K and walked the last stretch on her new prosthetic leg. Carol ran in the half-marathon and met her applauding daughters and son-in-law at the finish line. "Seeing them on the side, smiling and cheering, was a healing moment for all of us," says Carol. "I was finally able to let go of my lingering guilt."

At this year's Boston Marathon, the family is looking forward to replacing the painful memory with a triumphant one. Carol is determined to run again—and to cross the finish line. "My hope is that we can all meet where I got stopped last time and finish together," she says. And while the women continue to rebuild their lives, they take comfort in the fact that they don't have to do it alone. "We've learned that we're strongest when we're together," says Carol.



For more of Carol, Nicole and Erika's snapshots from the past year, download the tablet content of this issue at my.womansday.com.

LEND A HAND A fund has been set up at beststrongstaystrong.net to help with the family's recovery and medical expenses, such as hospital bills, home renovations and Erika's prosthetic leg.



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