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## Sandy Hook Mom Spared Life Of Paralysis Thanks To Local Surgeons

As Newtown resident Trudy Tuffy was preparing for a casual summertime gathering, she never expecting the event to result in her facing a lifetime of paralysis after sustaining a spinal cord injury when she fell out of a hammock.

Yet just months later, the Sandy Hook mother of two has experienced a near complete neurological recovery, and she is attributing the rapid and successful intervention of orthopedic spine surgeons David Bomback, MD, and his colleague, David Kramer, MD, co-director of The Spine Center at Danbury Hospital.

In fact, she was back to work fulltime at Scholastic, Inc, four months after the accident.

"It was amazing," said Ms Tuffy, referring to the quick sequence of events that had her in the operating room within three hours after injuring her spinal cord. "I feel fortunate to be living in a region where we have access to the best medical treatment you can find."

Ms Tuffy will share her experiences at a medical symposium on February 6 at Danbury Hospital featuring researchers from the world renowned Miami Project to Cure Paralysis (see related article in this edition). The Spine Center at Danbury Hospital, working in conjunction with the Miami Project in Florida, coordinated this symposium, and more than 300 people from Connecticut's medical and rehabilitation communities are expected to be in attendance to hear Ms Tuffy's story.

"Ms Tuffy's case demonstrates the high level of expertise and advanced spine treatment protocols available at our spine center," said Dr Kramer. As a regional medical facility and university teaching hospital, Danbury Hospital is often faced with handling complex spine cases, including revision surgery, scoliosis correction, and treatment of spinal cord injuries.

The local resident never imagined her backyard gathering would end tragically when she and a friend toppled over as they both jumped onto a hammock. The friend landed safely, but Ms Tuffy fell on her neck.

"I didn't realize the severity of my injury, even though I had no sensation or movement," she said. "I thought I just had a pinched nerve or something."

Fortunately, friends immediately called 911. The ambulance crew stabilized Ms Tuffy and brought her to the Emergency Department at Danbury Hospital, where a computed tomography (CT) scan of the neck was immediately obtained and the concerning results were rapidly communicated to Dr Bomback.

### Earth-Shattering News

The scan revealed that Ms Tuffy had dislocated her spinal column between the C5 and C6 vertebrae.

"Trudy was paralyzed from the neck down when she arrived at the hospital," said Dr Bomback. "The prognosis was poor. You rarely see a recovery in cases where the patient is completely paralyzed throughout both arms and legs."

But unlike other cases, Ms Tuffy had a few factors working in her favor.

"The key to Trudy's success was the quick responsiveness of everyone involved — from the emergency medical technicians in the field who protected her from further injury to the Emergency Department staff who recognized the need to quickly conduct imaging studies to the surgical team that was ready to operate within hours of the accident," said Dr Kramer. "Timing and preparedness were on her side."

[Enlarge image](#)

Newtowner Trudy Tuffy never thought a casual summertime gathering would result in her facing a lifetime of paralysis after sustaining a spinal cord injury when she fell out of a hammock. But after a recovery she deemed "miraculous," Ms Tuffy plans to share her experiences at a medical symposium on February 6 at Danbury Hospital featuring researchers from the world renowned Miami Project to Cure Paralysis. —Bee Photo, Voket

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Knowing that time was of the essence, Dr Bomback decided to forgo additional tests, such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), to get Ms Tuffy to the operating room as quickly as possible to begin repairing the primary injury to the spinal cord.

As part of the treatment plan, Ms Tuffy received intravenous steroids, an intervention thought to reduce any secondary injuries caused by the inflammation that occurs as a result of the spinal compression.

"Our primary goal with this surgery was to relieve the pressure on her spinal cord by realigning the dislocated vertebrae," explained Dr Bomback. Once he and Dr Kramer successfully achieved an emergent closed reduction of Ms Tuffy's cervical dislocation, a posterior cervical fusion was performed to stabilize the neck and prevent further injury.

### Positive Signs

The first indication that the surgical intervention had worked came in the middle of the night when Ms Tuffy was able to wiggle her toe. "That was a good sign," said Dr Bomback.

Dr Kramer performed a second surgery a few days later once Ms Tuffy was medically stable and had shown signs of neurological recovery.

"We felt that an anterior cervical discectomy and fusion would optimize her recovery by maximizing the decompression of her spinal cord and further stabilizing her neck," he said.

A week later, Ms Tuffy left Danbury Hospital for six weeks of intensive rehabilitation at Gaylord Hospital and now visits the facility twice a week for outpatient services. Her progress has amazed everyone.

"I credit my recovery to the techniques that Dr Bomback and Dr Kramer used early on to put me back together so quickly." She's also grateful to the rehabilitation team at Gaylord Hospital.

"The intensive physical therapy that I received was also exceptional. I'm pretty much back to normal now in that there isn't anything I can't do," she said. "It just takes me a bit longer."

Ms Tuffy's surgeons at Danbury Hospital also credited a positive attitude and strong family ties for contributing to her overall recovery.

"My husband has been incredibly supportive throughout this whole ordeal," Ms Tuffy recalled. "I was completely overwhelmed by all the support I received from my family and friends."

The experience was also difficult for her two sons, ages 12 and 9. "But they were troopers, and are thrilled that I've recovered and am back home," she said. "I have much to be thankful for."

