

Rodney Hammerstrom's Story
Many Miracles for This Young Man
By Heather Smith-Thomas

Some things are hard to explain or fully understand, and we can only accept them in faith and trust, and humble gratitude for God's grace. As one person once said, "There are no coincidences in life, just God instances."

Before the evening of October 15, 2003, Rodney, his parents (Barb and Daryl Hammerstrom) and his two brothers led a fairly typical life as a rodeoing family, at their little place near Davis, South Dakota—20 miles southwest of Sioux Falls. The whole family trains horses, team ropes and competes in cow penning and other rodeo events. But that suddenly changed, and it was awhile before some of them were able to get "back in the saddle" again.

Rodney's father, Daryl says the family has always had horses. "Back when Rod was young, we used to ride 25 to 30 head of young horses all the time, between the 3 boys and myself. That kept us busy, plus the boys were in school and my wife and I worked in town. The kids also participated in 4-H and high school rodeo," he says.

When they got into high school all three boys made the choice to continue with their horse activities rather than play football, basketball or any other sports, because they wanted to pursue their rodeo careers. This was their passion.

"Rod's passion was calf roping, bull dogging and team roping. He trained a lot of dogging horses, and one of his horses is still a dogging horse for a guy who competes in PRCA rodeos in South Dakota," says Daryl.

"We spent a lot of time together, training horses, until his accident. He was a senior in high school. A month before that, I'd broken my pelvis when a horse went to bucking with me. Rod and the other two boys were helping me a lot right then, because I wasn't able to do much. The middle boy Randy was in college, and our oldest son Rick lived about 3 miles from us. Between the 3 boys, they were taking care of everything around here," recalls Daryl.

Rod was working 2 different jobs along with school, and riding colts. "He was always busy, and had one young colt he'd just started and had about 30 rides on. It was a nice colt and he wanted to keep this one for calf roping because he liked him so much; he was such a responsive colt."

That evening Rod got home from school and his job, and decided to go ride that colt. "I told him that as long as he was going to do that, he might as well ride around the back pasture fence where we always turned a lot of the horses out in the wintertime. My oldest boy was getting the manure spreader ready to go haul manure. I told Rod to not be gone very long—so he could come back and help us."

It was a cold October night, and Rod didn't come home. "At first we didn't think that was unusual because if there was something else to be done he would rather go ride a horse than be spreading manure. But it was getting dark and I couldn't believe he wasn't home yet," says Daryl.

"So my oldest son and I got in the car and went to look for him, driving back toward the field where he should have been. An old railroad right-of-way goes through our place, and he was riding on the west side of that right-of-way. When we found him, we were just turning around in a driveway because we didn't see him out in that hayfield anywhere," says Daryl.

The horse had gone over a 4-strand barbed-wire fence sideways and was lying downhill on that railroad right-of-way bank, lying on top of Rod, with all four feet pointed uphill. "The

colt was higher up the bank than Rod was. The amazing thing was that the colt wasn't caught or stuck in the fence; he was just lying there. If he would have struggled or thrashed at all, he would have rolled right over Rod like a rolling pin and would have crushed him," Daryl says.

"The colt weighed about 850 pounds. My oldest boy Rick walked up quietly, so as not to startle the colt. Both of Rod's legs were underneath the colt. When they flopped over the fence, the colt must have fallen on top of him. We were afraid that Rod's foot was still stuck in the stirrup and we didn't want the horse to get up and run. So Rick grabbed the colt's tail to pull him off Rod while I drove home fast, to call the ambulance. Rick weighed 135 pounds, but pulled that colt up off of him. Then the colt got up, and trotted for home, just like his work was done and he could go home now. The only injury he had from going over the fence was a scratch about 4 inches long on one back leg. Otherwise there wasn't a mark on that horse."

"There was no reason for him to stay lying there, except the good Lord wanted him there. Later, the doctors told us that the warmth from that colt was the only thing that kept Rod alive, lying on the ground on that cold night. Otherwise he would have gone into shock and perished," recalls Daryl.

The ambulance pulled out into the hayfield where Rod was lying. "One of our neighbors was an EMT, and he saw us out there and stopped. He got on the phone and had them send the air ambulance because Rod wasn't regaining consciousness. When the ambulance crew got there they tried to stabilize him to put him on the helicopter, which landed in our hayfield, but they had to use shock paddles to get his heart started again. We'd lost him at that point. But they finally got him stabilized enough to get him into the air ambulance, and took him to the hospital at Sioux Falls."

"When we got there with him, Rod didn't have any motor activity at all in his left side. It looked really hopeless. He was in the ICU from October 15 until mid-November. The hospital gave us a room down the hall, and my wife and I both stayed there, since I was on crutches. We'd just go from our room to his, and neither one of us ever left the hospital or went outside."

They were with him all the time, talking to him, trying to encourage him to come out of the coma. Many people came to offer support. "The slowest day, with the least visitors, 39 people came to see us. They couldn't see Rod, so all his friends would come and visit with us, to give us encouragement to go give Rod encouragement," says Daryl.

"We have a very strong faith, and believe in the power of prayer. On the Saturday night before Rod woke up, there were 75 people there. They took chairs out of the waiting room and were all sitting in a circle next to our room. They started their prayer chain from the inside of the circle to the outside, and then into the room. The doctor had no expectation for recovery. We knew Rod had some brain activity but nothing was coming through. On Monday, he regained consciousness and was awake enough that we were able to take him into rehab. Today he is walking proof of the power of prayer."

Rod spent many weeks in rehab at the hospital. "I continued to stay with him through December, and his mother started going home at night. He'd gone from a 160-pound vibrant kid down to 112 pounds of skin over bones. He had to build his muscle mass back in order to be able to walk," explains Daryl.

"The therapists literally carried him, to get him started walking. They had one on each side lifting him, and a third person helping support him. The doctor told us his expectations were to get Rod talking, eating and in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He had no expectations that he would ever walk or team rope with us again."

While he was in rehab, Rod had a lot of things to relearn. He didn't know how to open his eyelids or move his tongue. "We would sit by him for hours, moving his eyelids up and down, and prop his mouth open with a washcloth so we could wiggle his tongue. He was farther behind than a newborn baby, because he couldn't swallow or move his tongue. This all had to be relearned," says Daryl.

While he was in the ICU, his left arm was bent at the elbow, pinned to his chest. "It didn't grow solid (immobile joint) like most do, and the doctors can't explain why his did not. But he had sores across his hand from his long fingernails, where they grew right into his hand, because there was no way to pry it open to trim the nails. When we got him into rehab we finally got his hand open enough to get them trimmed," Daryl says.

On Christmas Eve they wanted to bring him home, even just for a few hours. But the hospital staff said they couldn't do that. "If the insurance company realizes you can take him home and take care of him, they are done with him. I don't know what strings were pulled, but on Christmas Eve, about 3 p.m. they told us they had it set up to where we could take him home for a short while. We could pick him up at 9 a.m. on Christmas morning and we had to have him back by 7 that evening. It was the best Christmas we ever had, but we sure had to scramble!"

They had not been home, there was no food in the house, no Christmas tree, no Christmas shopping done. "We called our middle son, and he came to stay with Rod, because he had to have one of us with him all the time. The nurses and doctors are good, but they are really busy, and if you are not there to take care of your own person, serious things can happen," says Daryl.

"So when our middle son got there, Barb and I took off and went to the western store. She grabbed one guy and I grabbed another, and we said we want 'that, that, that and that' and had a big pile of stuff on the counter. They were closing at 5 p.m. and we got there at 4. We got our shopping done and went to the grocery store. Barb stayed up all night cooking. I set the Christmas tree up and we wrapped presents and spent the whole night getting everything ready so the family could all come have Christmas."

On New Year's the hospital let them bring him home again, as a trial run to see if the family could handle taking care of him. "We did. So on January 17th he got released from the hospital," says Daryl.

Rod was vice president of his FFA group, and they wanted to put on a benefit for him—something they'd never done before. They had a pancake dinner to raise money to help with his expenses. "On the way home that day, when I told him about it, he looked at me and began to comprehend, and then said he wanted to stop at the pancake dinner. I told him no, we had to get him home. But he insisted," recalls Daryl.

"So we went there, and I put him in a wheelchair. We got him up on the stage and they opened the curtain—and there were all those people there, and not a dry eye in the place! It was a very moving experience, and one that we will never forget," he says.

"They were expecting about 300 people and ended up serving over 750 people. They didn't have enough pre-mixed batter, and went through more than 100 dozen eggs. They ran out of eggs at the grocery store and some of the ladies went home and got eggs out of their refrigerators. They were mixing the batter in 5-gallon buckets with an electric drill with a spinner on it." But they fed all those people, and now the FFA does this every year for some family in crisis; it has grown into an amazing project.

"After Rodney was released from the hospital, I stayed home with him, and my wife went back to work. Rod was going for physical therapy 5 days a week in Sioux Falls. We ended up splitting the caregiving. At my place of work, the night guy had quit so they called to see if I

could do the nights. That was perfect! My wife would go to work in the morning and I took care of Rod during the day. We set up with the rehab people to have him start at 2 p.m. By the time Barb got off work, she could go pick him up, and I could go to work for the night shift. We did that for 8 months,” recalls Daryl.

Physical therapy was extremely important to regain muscle mass and strength. One of the best aids in his physical therapy, however, was unexpected. “God had put a lot of things in place. We had an old horse that Rod had been riding, but the horse was a little stiff in the front legs, and I’d been trying to sell him after the accident. But I couldn’t get rid of that horse. Nobody wanted him,” says Daryl.

“My dad had built an indoor arena/barn for us a few years earlier, for us to train horses in. We had everything we needed, for what was about to happen. Rod had been home only a week and said he had to get on his horse. I said no way. He was walking with a walker, and had to have help to use it.” But Rodney insisted on riding.

“We got him over to the barn that day, with his walker. We had the horse saddled and ready. Barb was on one side, helping him along with the walker, and I was on his left side, pulling the walker along for him. When we got ready to help him onto the horse I thought Barb had ahold of him and she thought I had ahold of him. She had turned her back to move the walker, and I had moved over to hold onto the horse, thinking Barb had ahold of Rod. We both turned around and witnessed the first steps he ever took by himself. His left arm came straight out, came around the saddle horn, and he was on that horse before either one of us could get to him!”

“Talk about talking your breath away! It was amazing. Rod was on the horse, and Barb said, ‘We’ve got to lead him’ and I made about 3 laps around the indoor barn in that deep sand and I was tired. I took the lead rope off, and away he went—and the rest is history,” says Daryl.

“When he was on his horse, his tremors slowed. It was like it was the natural place for him to be. As time went on, he started roping again. We had a lot of roping steers, including some slow ones, and Rod started on them, then started team roping with us again, and ropes with us today. He has a great old heel horse that takes care of him, and he does fine.” Horses were the best physical therapy he could have.

“About a year after he started riding again, we started speaking about the power of prayer. When we first started talking to various groups, Rod and I would go together. I would start out by explaining about the accident, and then Rod would recite some Bible verses and talk about his faith,” says Daryl.

“At that time, his physical therapist was doing a Christmas program, and she had some people come out and video Rod team roping and us talking about the accident. This is what they used for their Christmas program because they said he was one of their miracles. Later we would use that video in our inspirational talks, then I would speak a little and Rod would speak a little. That’s how we started doing church services.”

Then Rod progressed into doing it all himself. “He wanted people to know that life continues on after a detour like this. His passion as a youth was to be a PRCA cowboy. That’s all that kid wanted to do. He wants people to know that he actually did rodeo. At the end of the video he added the Chris LeDoux song ‘Bang a Drum’ then some of his senior pictures and a rodeo run, to finish out the video. This is what Rod uses when he does a church service, and he travels all over the country,” Daryl says.

Now he spends most of his time in Texas and Alabama. “He came home before Thanksgiving this year, and after Christmas went back to east Texas, Oklahoma and Dallas and

then flies home in mid-March. He goes south again the end of April to go to Texas, Louisiana, Alabama and Tennessee. He drives himself all over, but we always have host families for him to stay with because he still has tremors and can't eat by himself. He can do everything else on his own except shave and eat!"

"We are very blessed as a family. He has all of his memory except for a period starting about 2 days before the accident and going through the first of January. He barely remembers coming home that Christmas. That piece of time is missing in his memory," says Daryl.

He has come an amazing distance in his journey to regain a functional life. In the rehab sessions at the hospital they worked on speech therapy so he could talk again, along with physical therapy. "He went to those sessions every day while he was in the hospital, and afterward—for more than 3 years. Then for 2 more years he went 3 times a week, and then twice a week for another year. Then we got to a point where it seemed like he'd gotten as much progress that way as he was going to get, and he could just go on with his daily activities to keep him active.

Rodney says that those years of therapy as an outpatient, he treated it like going to a job. "I wasn't able to hold a job, so I just treated it that way. There were a lot of hours of relearning how to live a life," he says.

"His speech used to be so slow and awkward, and now his words follow each other," says Daryl. "Now he can do full sentences and it is easier to understand what he is saying. When he was in the hospital his vision was still impaired and he needed glasses. Now he no longer wears glasses and has 20/20 vision. We continue to see improvements all the time. Every time he gets back from down south we can see some positive changes," Daryl says.

"From the beginning of his recovery efforts, we weren't afraid to try anything, including acupuncture. The thing that helped most for his walking was warm water to aid circulation in his muscles. This got him walking more on his own, without the walker."

Through those trying times the family had a site on Caring Bridge. "That way we could send out messages and progress reports to all the people who were praying for us and following Rod's progress. People from all over the U.S. and several foreign countries sent us messages on that site. Some days we had more than 50 hits on it. Friends of ours had family overseas in England, Germany and Switzerland and they were sending messages and inspiration. Many church congregations and groups had Rod on their prayer chains," Daryl says.

"A lot of people came forward in support. Many of them we no longer see day to day like we did back then. It isn't that they aren't our friends anymore, but God has put them into someone else's life who needs them now. They were put in our path when we needed them, and we were very blessed," he says.

Many people came forward with emotional, spiritual and financial support since Daryl was still recovering from his broken pelvis and wasn't working. "People would walk up and hand us \$20 or buy us meals. One young man who was a friend of our oldest brought us dozens of Crispy Cream donuts! We had more than we could eat and gave some to the nurses on the ICU floor where Rod was, and then to other people throughout the hospital! Five days a week we'd have 2 dozen Crispy Cream donuts!"

It's been an amazing journey. At one point along the way, after one of their testimonial presentations, someone asked Rod if he was bitter about the accident. He sat there for a long time before answering. "Then he finally said, 'No, I am not bitter about my accident. If it hadn't happened, I would have been Rodney Hammerstrom, the PRCA cowboy. Now I am someone who gets to meet all these people who have been put into my life, as well as being friends with

all the PRCA guys and ropers.’ We don’t look at his accident as a tragedy. We look at it as a blessing. One of the biggest things my wife and I have learned through it all is that we need to learn to get out of the way and follow and let God show us where he wants us to be. We’re learning to let Him speak through us when we are in a situation to show what our faith is, and what God has done in our life and what He can do in other people’s lives. Our journey is far from over. People send Barb and me letters and thank us for letting Rod do what he is doing, but I tell them we don’t have a choice. It’s God’s choice,” says Daryl.

Barb says that before it happened, “We had faith, but this put to the test. We feel fortunate, because with a brain injury like this, the doctors told us that recovery depends a lot on the person and how the person accepts it and deals with it,” she says.

“The doctors said his recovery depended on him, but the fact he was young they had high hopes. They thought he would have a lot of disabilities and disadvantages, however. They also said that with a traumatic brain injury personalities can change. The person might be more intense, or angry about the world, or have less patience with things. The doctors warned us that we might not have the same son back, with the same personality he had earlier,” she says.

“But we were very blessed. Before the accident Rod was pretty much a ‘go-with-the-flow’ kid. He was a good kid, working a couple jobs and busy with horses. The country life gave him a good foundation. We felt blessed that he did come back with the same personality. He accepted things and decided to take on the challenge of trying to get a life back, and not feel victimized. He took what was laid out in front of him and did his best with it. His acceptance and attitude made a big difference,” Barb says.

“A lot depends on the choices people make in life. And his good attitude helped with his recovery. Even though the recovery was hard and rehab was tough because his body wasn’t cooperating, he kept at it. He went from a very strong young man to needing 24 hour care because he couldn’t take care of himself. For a young kid, this is pretty tough to take,” she says. A person’s life can change in an instant, and sometimes it’s only our faith that can carry us through.

After he was out of the ICU and going through therapy, Daryl would spend the days with Rodney and go home at nights. “The doctor said that with a traumatic brain injury, the patients all go through depression at some point. Rod had made it past the first of the year and things were going smoothly, and I was spending the days with him, helping with his therapy,” says Daryl.

“I got there one morning and the nurse told me that Rod had sunk into depression that night and they couldn’t get him to do anything. He was just sitting slumped in his wheelchair and didn’t want to go to therapy. I went in and tried the happy tactic to try to draw him out of it, but that didn’t work. So I said, ‘Well Rod, what’s the matter?’

In his slow voice, Rod answered and said he just couldn’t do it anymore; he just couldn’t see any way out of it, or any way to get his life back. “I asked if he’d looked at every option, and he said ‘Yes, Dad, I think I’ve looked at every option.’ So I asked him if he’d prayed and asked the Lord about it, and turned it over to Him? He didn’t say anything and just sat there slumped over with his head about down to his knees and I didn’t say anything more. That was the longest 15 minutes of my life,” says Daryl.

“Then he picked his head up and said, ‘Well, Dad, I guess I’ll just turn it over to God and we’ll see where this all goes, and I guess I’d better get to rehab.’ And he’s not had a bad day since.”

Daryl tells about a time later when a church in Michigan wanted Rod to come and give his testimony and video. “They flew the 3 of us to Grand Rapids. At the end of every service, Rod would always say to the people that they didn’t need to have a brain injury to turn problems over to the Lord and have God involved in their lives. We’d ask people to come forward and I would usually do a healing prayer for whatever was hurting them in their life at the time,” he says.

There were more than 750 people there. “We got done and asked if people wanted to come forward for a healing prayer. Rod poked me and said he wanted to do the prayer that night, and 750 people came forward—all except one lady who was nursing a baby. They were all sitting there in a half circle around the stage with their hands on Rod, and on each other’s shoulders, all the way through the whole crowd. Rod got done with the prayer and the gal who was still sitting in the back started singing Amazing Grace (Rod’s favorite song), and the whole crowd sang with her, with no piano, and it was beautiful. Not a dry eye in the group. We’ve had hundreds of wonderful memories like that, and many people have touched our lives,” says Daryl.

It’s been an incredible journey. “My wife and I both grew up on farms, milking cows. We started dating when she was a freshman and I was a sophomore in high school. Who would ever have thought God would put us in a situation like this, meeting people from all over the country?”

Barb says their story is a lot to tell, and she feels God wanted them to use it as a vehicle for touching people. Rod has now spoken to more than 15,000 people.