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# Mount Olive Woman Perseveres 15 Years After Accident

Maria Tetto survives brain injury, committed to helping others.

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## SURVIVOR

Maria Tetto perseveres despite a serious accident when she was a teenager. By her side is her father and primary caregiver, Frank.

Posted: Friday, May 23, 2014 3:00 am  
By PHIL GARBER, Managing Editor | 0 comments  
MOUNT OLIVE TWP. – Maria Tetto was insistent that any questions be addressed directly to her and not through her father, Frank.

Asked about her goals, Tetto, 28, was clear.  
“I’m focused on “My Community” to change public policy to let people live their own lives,” she said, referring to the “My Community Care Team,” a non-profit formed by Tetto and her father.

Asked about what she likes to do best and she again answered without hesitating, “Helping others.”

Not bad for a young woman who was 13 when she nearly died after suffering a traumatic brain injury when she was struck by a pickup truck in Budd Lake. She spent a month in Morristown Memorial Hospital, several months at Children’s Specialized Hospital in Mountainside and 17 months as an inpatient at Matheny Medical and Educational Center in Peapack-Gladstone.

Wheelchair bound, Tetto returned to the Budd Lake home of her parents, Frank and Alycia, in April 2000, and graduated from Mount Olive High School in 2006. She now works three days a week at “Presents of Mind,” a gift shop in Flanders operated by Community Options, an organization that develops residential and employment supports for people with severe disabilities.

Upbeat Personality

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Tetto, an attractive brunette-haired woman, was non-verbal for three years after the accident. No more. Now she speaks freely and smiles easily and frequently. Her speech is sometimes difficult to understand but she will be heard.

She gets around her apartment in a special Permobil C500 wheelchair provided by the Matheny Center.

"After my accident, I got stuck in happy," Maria said. "I may not be able to walk but I can run - run my life."

Frank Tetto, 66, is equally animated, outspoken and clearly devoted to his daughter as her primary caregiver since the accident on March 2, 1998. He was at his daughter's bedside 24 hours a day for six months when she was in Children's Specialized Hospital.

He said he is "bonded like an animal" to his daughter and her care is his full-time job. He made \$100,000 a year as a former production manager with the N.Y. Times, but stopped outside work after the accident.

"We've sacrificed," Frank Tetto said.

The toughest days and months were after the accident. At the hospital, Frank Tetto was told his daughter was too injured to be rehabilitated. Ten days after the accident, with Maria in the intensive care unit at Morristown Memorial Hospital, Frank Tetto was asked to sign a waiver for his daughter's organ donations.

"To ask me that was unconscionable," Mr. Tetto said.

He said his daughter has shown the doctors and others that they were wrong.

"Maria's recovery has been remarkable," Mr. Tetto said. "We're thankful she survived. When death came looking for Maria, Maria gave death a whipping."

Maria lives semi-independently in her own apartment, which is adjacent to the home of her parents and six brothers. She lives with her personal aide, Tresa Murphy, who helps Maria out of bed in the morning, assists her in her personal care and breakfast, before Murphy leaves each day for another full-time job.

"I love Tresa," Maria said in an interview in her apartment.

For the last three years, Maria has worked from 1 to 5 p.m., every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at "Presents of Mind" on Route 206 in Flanders. Her brother, Vito, 32, doubles as her aide and transports Maria to the worksite. She helps make greeting cards and proudly creates her own custom-made cards on a computer.

"If you're looking for a card, just ask me and I'll make one for you," she said.

The arrangement is good for Maria because she is productive but also because she interacts with the public, said her father. Asked how much she charges for the custom-made cards, she quickly answered, "Zip."

Her requests to help aren't always quickly answered. Maria recently offered to volunteer to make computer data entries at the Mount Olive Public Library but was told there was a waiting list. Mr. Tetto hopes the library accepts Maria's offer as it would help her socialization while she would work at no cost with an aide to help with any personal needs.

"She's always trying to find ways to help people," her father said.

That's how it was when she returned to high school after her accident. She had previously been in the school choir and members of the choir visited her in the hospital. After she returned to school, she again joined the choir.

"It gave hope to other individuals (with disabilities)," her father said. "People joined who you hadn't seen in the choir before. She helped open that door."

Maria has continued singing and joins with her mother to sing on Sundays with the choir at St.

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Jude's Roman Catholic Church in Budd Lake.

The Tettos have had continuous battles with state and federal agencies to win services. One of the first battles came when Mr. Tetto wanted her daughter discharged from the Matheny School to return home. It was costing \$200,000 a year at Matheny but the former, state Division of Developmental Disabilities was willing to pay for just 20 hours of home care a month, a value of about \$4,000 a month or \$48,000 a year. Despite the huge savings in having Maria at home, the state insisted that she remain at the very costly Matheny Hospital.

"I brought her home anyway," Mr. Tetto said. "She wasn't going to remain institutionalized. She belonged home."

The Tettos fought the state for more care and won, now receiving payment for 120 hours a week. As for help that's not covered, "There's always the non-paid family member to help," he said.

Another victory was when the Tettos appealed a Medicaid ruling and won payment for special thickened liquids that Maria needs because she has trouble swallowing.

The initial problem with bringing Maria home was that there was no wheelchair ramp.

"When I first came to home sweet home, my family carried me up to the house," Maria said.

The family soon built a ramp, making a huge difference in Maria's ability to come and go from the house for everything from work to eating out at restaurants or going to the movies.

The Tettos are proud of the work they do with their "My Community Care Team," a non-profit advocacy organization that provides referrals and information for people with disabilities. They learn of people's needs through various sources, including an on-line traumatic brain injury support group.

"We give help at no charge," said Maria.

A situation that Mr. Tetto read about in the newspaper was typical of the type of care the group offers. The story involved a young disabled man who needed transportation to his job at the Rockaway Mall. Mr. Tetto called and offered to help at no charge.

"Either I would do it on my own or I'd send Maria and her staff," Mr. Tetto said.

The offer was accepted and the Tettos provided transportation for the young man for several months.

"We do good things," Maria said.

Mr. Tetto said he read in the newspaper about another similar situation that involved a disabled man who needed someone to drive him to the doctor. Mr. Tetto called and offered to help.

"I said that we understand how someone in a family has work and life challenges," Mr. Tetto said.

Another time Community Care used donations it had collected to provide a ramp for a man who had been unable to find funding. Mr. Tetto said he learned of the man's needs on the Freecycle website.

"There was no obligation and no paperwork," Mr. Tetto said. "We paid for the ramp and installed it in two weeks."

Maria also is particularly proud of having donated her hair four times to the "Locks of Love" organization that provides hair to people with cancer.

Mr. Tetto was clear when asked what he wants for his daughter.

"The goal is for her to run her own life," he said.

To contact "My Community Care Team," call (973)-691-8619; email [info@mycommunitycareteam.com](mailto:info@mycommunitycareteam.com); or visit the website at [www.mycommunitycareteam.com](http://www.mycommunitycareteam.com)

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