

More2Life

STARS & GRIPES

Dinner at famed Belfast bar let down by the din: Page 37

PAWS AND PENDANTS

Jeweller's range honours beloved pets: Page 36

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Scientist Lauren raising funds for hospital unit which saved her life after motorbike accident. She tells **Jade Beecroft** she can't wait to get back on two wheels. Pages 34&35

'I smashed my pelvis & fractured my spine... but I still want to get back on my bike'

The only thing Lauren Cruickshank can remember about the evening that changed her life is getting her beloved motorbike out of her garage.

Her next memory is waking up in intensive care in Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital a week later with the very clear conviction she'd "messed up".

The 36-year-old was out riding with friends in Co Down on August 13, 2024, when she crashed her Kawasaki bike, leaving her with multiple injuries including a smashed pelvis, spinal fracture, broken femur and wrist.

Almost two years on, and following three surgeries, Lauren has raised just over £3,200 for the unit that saved her life.

Even though she's still undergoing physio and walking with a crutch, she has started a PhD and is dreaming of getting back on her motorbike.

"It's such an amazing feeling and totally engrossing," says Lauren, who is originally from Coalisland but now lives in Craigavon. "When you're riding a motorbike, you don't think about anything else."

"The biker community is brilliant too. It doesn't matter who you are or what background you're from, talking about bikes gives you an instant bond."

The research scientist became interested in biking through her colleague and best friend Síaneen Sayres.

"It was her husband Glenn who first took me out on the back of his bike, and that was it: I was hooked," she says.

"Síaneen is only petite, and I thought 'If she can



Lauren in her wrestling days

do it, so can I'.

"One of my favourite things about being a biker was having wee girls coming over to me during ride outs and saying 'Is this your bike?', and me telling them that girls can be bikers too."

Lauren, who used to be a wrestler, passed her motorcycle test in 2017 and bought her pride and joy – a Kawasaki ER6F with paintwork to match her auburn hair.

CAUTIOUS

She initially joined a women-only bikers group run by her instructor, as well as going for rides with Síaneen, Glenn and other biker friends as she got to know the community.

"I would describe myself as quite a cautious rider," she says. "For me it was never about the speed – it was always the experience, the scenery and the community."

"I loved going out for rides up to the North Coast

or down to Portaferry, and I always preferred riding in company."

Tuesday, April 13, 2024, was a "gorgeous summer's day", so after finishing work and going home via Tesco, Lauren made plans to head out for a ride with friends.

"The last thing I remember is getting my bike out of the garage," she says.

Lauren crashed on the Dromore Road, just outside Ballynahinch, doing around 35 to 40mph.

She'll never know for sure what caused her to lose control but believes her front wheel slid out on an uneven, slightly inclined patch of road.

Her friends called 999, and a woman from a nearby house came to help, along with an off-duty paramedic and nurses.

Lauren was blue-lighted to the Royal, where her worried family gathered.

"It was definitely touch and go. I had to be intubated because my lungs

collapsed," she says.

"I have snatches of memory – the sound of Velcro from the pelvic board, my helmet lying on the hospital floor and the pain of being moved."

"It was about a week later when I woke up properly. I saw my mum Brenda at my bedside, and my first real thought was 'Oh, I've messed up'."

"Doctors kept saying I'd done my pelvis bad. It was broken in several places."

"By the time I woke up, I'd had two surgeries to put pins, plates and screws in my pelvis, femur and right wrist."

Lauren's family was incredible, and she didn't spend a single visiting hour alone, with Brenda, her dad Gavin and sisters Rachel Cruickshank and Fiona Laird taking turns with her friends and colleagues.

After two weeks, she was moved to the hospital's major trauma unit, and when she couldn't sleep, her mum kept her company on FaceTime all night.

"She would sit with me and I would drift off to sleep, and when I woke up again, she'd still be there," she remembers.

At around 5am on August 28, she told her mum she wasn't feeling well, and medics discovered she had multiple pulmonary embolisms.

Lauren recalls: "Mum told me to call someone, so I pressed my buzzer. A nurse came in, hit an alarm and, all of a sudden, the room was full of people. It was pretty scary."

"The doctor told me afterwards it was a good job I knew my body and called for help."

Lauren was eventually moved from the Royal to the trauma unit in Crai-





Lauren Cruickshank working on her recovery; and (left) with friends and supporters at her quiz night



Lauren in hospital; and (below) on her bike before the accident



‘By the time I woke up, I’d had two surgeries to put pins, plates and screws in my pelvis, femur and wrist’

gavon Area Hospital to continue her recovery, and after three months, she was discharged into the care of her parents, with a hospital bed set up in their downstairs bedroom.

She underwent a third surgery, to add more metalwork to her femur, in March last year.

CRUTCHES

Now she’s living independently but still has weekly physiotherapy and is facing two more surgeries on her wrist this summer.

“My goal is to be able to walk without my crutches, and I’d love to run again,” she says.

“I work for Aramune Technologies in Belfast, and they’ve been amazing. I hate doing nothing, so I was working from my laptop, and now they have helped me back into the office.

“Last February, they also supported me starting my PhD in next generation terrestrial plants and their

potential impact on live-stock farming.”

Lauren and her supporters raise funds for REVIVE, a charity that supports the work of the regional intensive care unit at the Royal, with a pub quiz, raffle and ride out earlier this spring.

“The staff in ICU are incredible, and the work they do is phenomenal,” she says.

“They support patients and families through some of the worst times they’ll ever experience. They were there for me during the worst time of my life.”

Lauren’s bike has been fixed up and is sitting in a friend’s garage, ready and waiting for her to get back in the saddle.

“I still love my bike,” she says. “I want to get back out there, riding with my community in our beautiful Northern Irish countryside.”

● To Support Lauren’s fundraising, visit www.justgiving.com/page/lcr-revive0824?utm_medium=FR&utm_source=CL

Gardening

Alan Mercer of Hillmount Garden Centre shares his gardening tips exclusively with Sunday Life readers



The busiest & best time of the year

June, which starts tomorrow, is one of the most rewarding months in the gardening calendar.

Our borders are bursting into life, hanging baskets are beginning to spill over with colour, and vegetable plots are finally producing the first summer harvests.

The longest daylight hours grace us, and with warmer temperatures, it’s also one of the busiest times for gardeners, as regular maintenance will help our gardens thrive right through the summer.

It may seem like basic advice, but I cannot stress enough that one of the most important jobs during June is watering. Early morning or late evening watering is best, allowing moisture to soak into the soil before evaporation.

Newly planted bedding plants and veg especially benefit from consistent watering while they establish strong roots.

EFFORT

Deadheading spent flowers regularly will encourage plants to continue flowering throughout the season, especially early summer favourites such as geraniums, petunias and pansies.

A customer asked me last week how often they should be mowing their lawn, and with grass growing rapidly in June, regular mowing is essential.

Raising the blades slightly can help prevent grass from scorching and keep lawns looking greener for longer. Edging pathways and borders also gives gardens a neat, well-maintained appearance with very little effort.

I try to avoid mentioning them every week, but weeds can’t be ignored. Warm soil and longer days encourage weeds just as much as flowers and vegetables, so keeping on top of them now saves much bigger jobs later in the season.

● If you have a question for Alan, email him at alan@hillmount.co.uk or message him on facebook at www.facebook.com/hillmountgardencentre. For inspiration for your garden, log on to www.hillmount.co.uk and follow them on instagram — www.instagram.com/hillmountbelfast