

# Lucky to be alive *Aug 5/90 issue*

## Justin endures a 4,800 volt jolt

by Patrick Raftis

TIVERTON—A shock of 4,800 volts of electricity is more than enough to kill a person. However, six-year-old Justin Ribey, of RR 3, Tiverton is riding his bike, playing with his friends and enjoying the last few weeks of summer holidays, just two months after being jolted with that voltage when a kite he was flying struck an electrical power line.

Justin was visiting his grandparents, Ken and Maxine Ribey, also of RR 3, Port Elgin on Wednesday, May 30. He was playing on the beach near their home, watching for tadpoles in a small pond while his grandmother was planting flowers nearby.

He was also flying a kite. Justin said the weather that day was good for kite flying and he had no problem getting the kite in the air. Absorbed in watching for tadpoles he said he didn't see the kite drifting near the hydro lines which surrounded the property.

Justin said he felt "a jolt," and let go of the string. However, by that time, the electricity had ran down the cord, entered his body through his left wrist and exited through the baby toe of his right foot.

He doesn't recall much else about the accident. "I think he was in a state of shock at the time," said his father, Norm Ribey.

When Justin's grandmother discovered what had happened, she rushed him to the house and administered first aid procedures, wrapping the injured areas in damp towels.

Justin's left wrist had been torn open and he received third degree burns to his hand and wrist, second degree burns to his arm and scattered third degree burns across his torso and legs.

The jolt had blown holes in the shoulders and elbows of his nylon jacket and the exiting electricity had blown a small hole in one of the rubber-soled running shoes he was wearing.

Albert Zwart, area manager at Ontario Hydro's Walkerton office said it could have been much worse.

"He should have been dead," said Zwart. "The heart doesn't need much electricity to throw it off."



HAPPY ENDING—Justin Ribey, 6, is enjoying the summer after surgery to repair damage caused by electrical shock after a kite he was flying got caught on a hydro-electric power line on on May 30. From left, Justin's mother, Barb Ribey, brother Benjamin, 1, and father Norm Ribey. (Raftis photo)

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Zwart said the fact that the ground in the area was wet, combined with the fact the kite string was a type of polyester twine with thin metal wires running through it created "a perfect set-up" for the accident to happen.

If normal cord or string had been used, Zwart said the string probably would have just burned up and not conducted the shock to Justin's body.

After the incident, which happened around 4:30 p.m., Justin's grandparents called his father and told him what had happened. Then they rushed him to the hospital in Southampton.

Barb Ribey was working at the Bruce County Museum in Port Elgin when her husband called around 5:10 p.m.

"He just told me to meet Maxine and Ken at the hospital. He said that Justin had apparently been flying a kite and had burned his hand.

The way Norm was talking, I didn't think it was that serious."

Justin's mother arrived at the hospital before his grandparents arrived with the boy, around 5:30 p.m.

"They put him directly on a stretcher. When they unwrapped the towels, I saw he had burns scattered across his body," he kept saying "I can't move my arm," she said.

After consulting with physicians in Owen Sound, doctors at Southampton decided to transfer Justin to the hospital there. He was taken to Owen Sound by ground ambulance around 7:30 and immediately placed in isolation.

"We didn't get a clear picture of how serious it was until we got to Owen Sound. They called down to Sick Children's (hospital in Toronto) immediately. The way the doctors and nurses there were scurrying around, we knew something was up," said Norm.

Around 10:30 p.m. Justin was transferred to Toronto by air ambulance. He was placed in the intensive care unit, where steps were taken to stabilize his condition. This included cutting open his left arm to reduce swelling which was cutting off circulation to his fingers.

The next morning Justin underwent a surgical procedure known as a pedicle flap. Because there was

not enough skin left on his wrist to close the wound, an incision was made in Justin's groin and the wrist was placed inside it, to allow the body to heal the wound naturally.

Later, Justin underwent skin graft operations on other areas of his hand and arm.

He was released from the hospital on June 19 and allowed to come home. However he will have to return to the hospital in the fall for about a week, to undergo tendon replacement, more skin grafts and nerve-reattachment surgery.

Barb said Justin would probably be in hospital for about another week, before returning home in time to start Grade One with his classmates.

Physiotherapy treatments of about two hours per day have helped Justin recover some movement in his fingers and wrists already. While 100 per cent recovery of movement is not expected, initial results are encouraging, said Barb.

"He's really determined and so am I. The whole family is determined and we won't settle for anything less than 80 per cent."

While the accident and subsequent treatment have been "pretty emotional," for Justin, Barb said the boy has been remarkably positive through the experience. She said Justin finds it easier to discuss the accident than she does and Justin has some fond memories of how nice the nurses were to him in the hospital.

While their story has a happy ending, the family wanted to share the experience with others, as a warning to take special care around power lines. They are aware the outcome could have been different.

"On the trip back from Owen Sound, we had some pretty scary thoughts going through our head about the loss of a hand and things like that," said Norm.

While the kite Justin used that day was destroyed, the Ribey's gave the cord used to fly it to Ontario Hydro. Hydro officials have used it in educational trips to area schools, to warn other children not to use the attractive orange twine on their kites.

"Stay away from overhead wires," is the message Zwart said he wants to send to youngsters.