

Nearly dying couldn't stop her wedding

COMMUNITY SPIRIT: Wedding planner calls contacts to help with the big day

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Chelsee Atherley and Ben Klemioneuk are getting married, and that's a beautiful thing.

It is, after all, what high-school sweethearts deeply in love do.

But this couple's big day almost never happened.

The fact she will walk down the aisle at all is testament to a strength that belies Atherley's 22 years — and to the generosity of wedding professionals who have put profit aside to give the couple a precious day stolen from them in the blink of an eye nine months ago.

On July 11, 2005, Atherley was in the passenger seat of a car driven by her 18-year-old sister, Justine, when it was broadsided by a dump truck at a Langley intersection. The driver was later charged with failing to maintain his brakes.

Justine, four months pregnant, was banged up but not seriously hurt. Chelsee, however, bore the brunt of an impact so severe that some of her hair ended up jammed into the truck grill. After being cut from the wreckage, she would spend the next 11 days in a coma with a brain injury.

Chelsee woke up at Royal Columbian Hospital on July 22, the day before she was to be married.

"When I came out out of the

coma, I couldn't talk. It was like a whisper," she says, taking time to choose and pronounce her words. Speech, she says slowly, is still a challenge. So is walking.

"My talking isn't good, and my walking isn't perfect. I just can't do some of the things I could do before," she says.

Their wedding day came and went. Chelsee spent the next two months in hospital learning the basics all over again. Ben, 23, was by her side all the way.

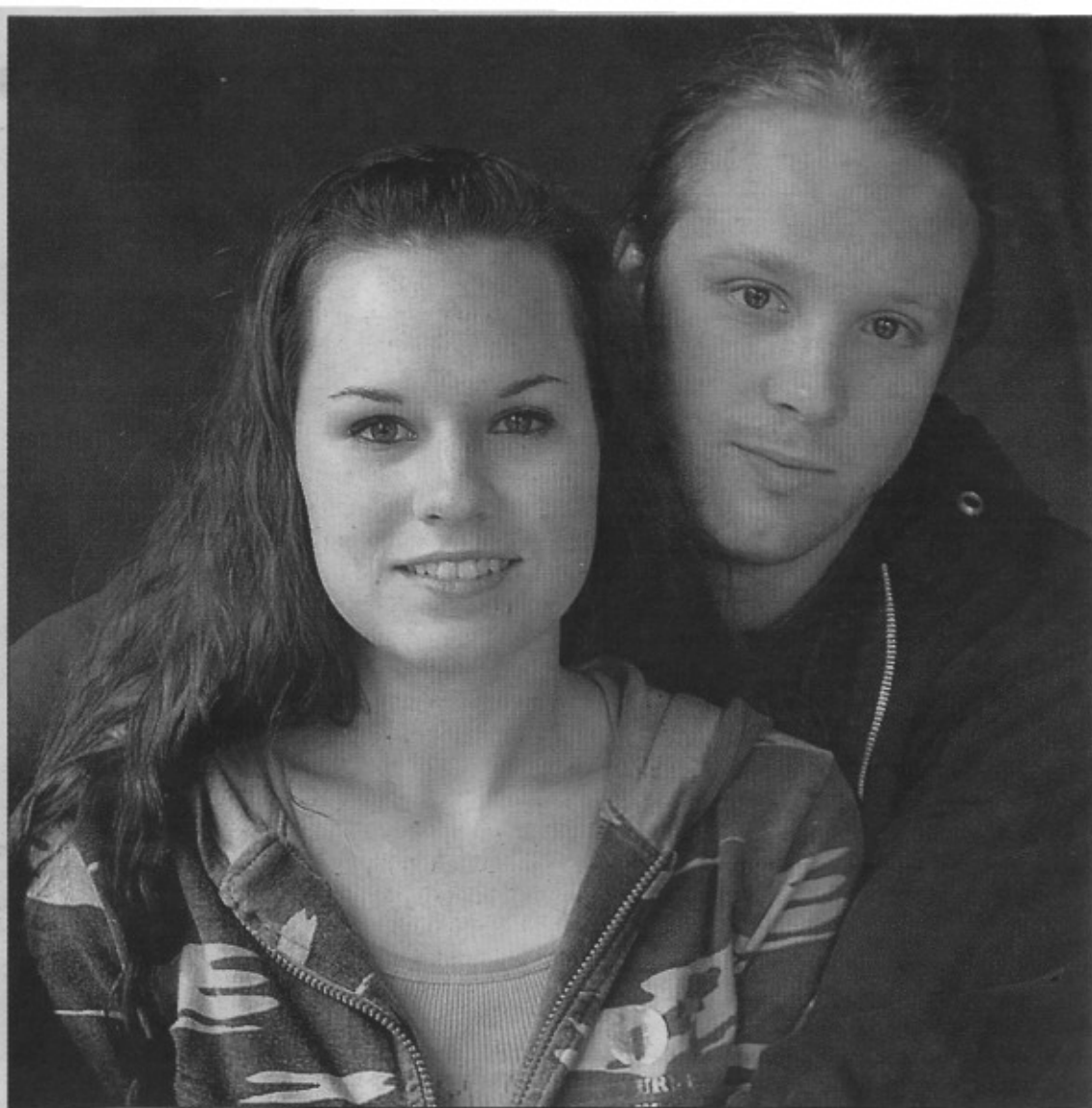
Wedding money saved by the Atherleys went to a whole host of new expenses they'd never anticipated. Chelsee, who used to be a waitress, can't work and she can't drive. The wedding was rescheduled, but it would be a lean affair.

Then along came wedding and event planner Elana Lancit, owner of A Sweet Beginning, the company behind such high-profile weddings as broadcaster Tamara Taggart's marriage to 54/40 guitarist Dave Genn.

Lancit knew Chelsee because the young woman had done some work for her in the past. When she heard about the accident, missed nuptials and the family's struggle to make ends meet this time around, Lancit didn't hesitate.

"She's a very nice girl," Lancit says. "I just think she deserves it."

Lancit called her contacts in the



Chelsee Atherley and Ben Klemioneuk are having their wedding after all. LES BAZSO — THE PROVINCE

wedding industry and lined up a cake courtesy of Paula Lyons Cake Design. Pin Point Productions videographer Jeff Birch is volunteering his time, Luis Giraldo will play the piano, and a hair and makeup artist for the bride is all set to go. Lancit is inviting anyone else who wants to join the effort to get in touch.

"I think it's awesome," says the bride-to-be's mother, Heather Atherley. "Any little bit of help will be awesome."

In the end, though, this is a story

about love realized despite the odds. For carpenter fiancé Klemioneuk, the memory of that terrifying day in July, of not knowing what would happen to the woman he loves, will never fade.

"It's one of those things you can't describe. You really don't ever want that to happen to anyone — even your worst enemy," he says.

"All of a sudden, control becomes an illusion. It's the worst feeling I've ever had."

The couple met when he was 17 and she was 16.

"I took her to my prom. She took me to hers," Klemioneuk says.

What he wants is simple — all truck drivers to know their machines and know the roads they drive on.

Chelsee says she's just happy to have Ben and her sister's son Mason, born healthy and happy despite the accident.

As for his wedding, Klemioneuk says the best part is already taken care of: "All I wanted was her. I've got her."

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