



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

A tale of tragedy and victory

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

Published: Sunday, January 25, 2015 at 6:45 p.m.

About a mile east of Interstate 75 in Sarasota, Barbara Shulla's life took a turn for the worse.

As she and her husband Curtis finished his Herald-Tribune delivery route, a drunken driver drifted lanes on Proctor Road and smashed head-on into the couple's minivan during the early morning hours of Dec. 18, 2011.

The collision killed both Curtis and the intoxicated driver, Ardell Daniels II, a former local high school football star. Barbara was critically injured, and doctors said it would be 18 months before she would walk again.

Astonishingly, Shulla was back on her feet in less than four months. Last October, she self-published "From Tragedy To Victory," a 44-page book chronicling her recovery.

This is her story:

Curtis Shulla had one last Sunday paper to deliver.

For two years, the 47-year-old rose early seven days a week to finish his route before dawn.

The day he died, like every Sunday, Curtis's wife of 17 years was never far from his side. She would join him in their white 1996 Dodge Caravan, passing him bundles of papers from the backseat.

Most Sundays they worked from 1 to 6 a.m. Then they went to Restoration Fellowship Church, where Curtis played bass guitar in the worship band.

"I can't say I enjoyed it, but I wanted to help him," Barbara, now 47, recalled of the deliveries. "I loved to be around him."

In the pre-twilight darkness, Curtis turned west onto Proctor Road. Barbara moved to the front passenger seat, and they drove toward I-75.

There was ample time for the couple to complete their last delivery to Madfish Grill on Cattlemen Road before the day's first light.

As Curtis rounded a bend between Falcon Place and Hunters Run, Daniels hurtled toward them in a rented Volvo S40. The Florida Highway Patrol estimated he was traveling 110 mph.

The 29-year-old — once a running back for Venice High School's state championship football team and a Division I player — crossed lanes and drove into the Shulla's minivan.

The head-on collision sent the minivan off the north side of Proctor, where it flipped once before coming to a rest in the grassy shoulder. Daniels and Curtis died at the scene.

A FHP investigator later determined Daniels had a blood alcohol level of .25, more than three times the legal limit.

Barbara was the wreck's only survivor. A Bay Flite helicopter flew her to the Blake Medical Center in Bradenton for treatment of two shattered legs, two broken hands, a broken hip, a fractured neck and a ruptured spleen and liver.

The aftermath of the wreck has remained etched in the memory of FHP State Trooper Kenn Watson, who arrived on scene as dawn's early glow illuminated the two vehicles' crumpled metal.

"I remember specifically that the van's front end had been crushed all the way up into the seats," said Watson, a 20-year veteran of Florida law enforcement. "It was one of the worst collisions I have seen, most certainly on a county road."

Two weeks later, Barbara Shulla opened her eyes.

She had just emerged from a medically induced coma. Since the wreck she had been in Blake Medical's Trauma Center.

She was confused, scared and unable to move. She wanted to ask where her husband was, but a breathing tube prevented her from speaking.

Shulla had no memory of the crash or the dozen or so surgeries that followed it. Rods and pins were holding together her hip, neck and both legs.

"I felt hopeless and helpless," she said. "Everything had to be done for me and to me."

Eventually out came the breathing tube and her questions.

Family members told her Curtis had died. His funeral would be held on Jan. 7, 2012.

Still bedridden, Barbara was unable to attend.

"They made me a DVD of the memorial service," she said. "I watched it a year later."

She could have given up then and there, withering in her hospital bed, overwhelmed by the loss of her husband, her health and her former life.

Instead, Shulla put her faith in God and her medical team.

During the day, she obsessively performed occupational therapy exercises. At night, she counted blessings instead of sheep to help her fall asleep.

"I started with 'Thank God I'm alive. Thank God I have 10 fingers and toes. Thank God they say I will walk again,'" she said.

Six weeks after her accident, she left the Trauma Center for half-a-year of physical therapy at Life Care Center of Sarasota.

In January of 2012, her medical team had told her it could be 18 months before she walked again. Shulla stood for the first time on April 3 that year.

She graduated from walking with the assistance of parallel bars, to a walker, to a cane. Her progress brought her out of care center and in a Sarasota home before the year ended.

The month after Curtis Shulla's death, a group from his church completed the Ringling Bridge Run in his honor. They wore black-and-white "Running With Curtis" T-shirts as they jogged high above Sarasota Bay.

A large man on a mission to get fit, Curtis had completed his first official 5K at the Sandy Claws Beach Run nearly a week before his death.

In October, 2013, Barbara Shulla decided to remember her late husband in a similar fashion. She would complete that year's iteration of Curtis's last race.

She paid \$30 for a bargain of a three-wheel bike. She rode laps around Bayfront Park for two or three miles every morning and evening to strengthen her legs and build endurance.

It was the first outdoor exercise she'd been able to do on her own since the wreck.

"I would challenge myself to go further each day," she said. "People would say 'Round two, huh Barbara?'"

Although she wound up not competing in the official race, Shulla did the next best thing. A week before the event, she and a group of about 50 friends and family walked Siesta Beach in her husband's honor.

They also wore "Running With Curtis" T-shirts, this time a shade of royal blue instead of black.

Emboldened by the personal feat, Shulla began writing a book about her recovery. A year after she bought her bike, "From Tragedy To Victory" was published and for sale.

"The book is a tool to get the testimony out there," she said. "There's more to the story than just sitting around a table and telling what you've been through. You can go in depth... and give details that are powerful to someone's recovery."

Part of Shulla's proceeds from book sales will go toward the recently established Curtis Wayne Shulla Memorial Scholarship Fund. The scholarship will help provide emergency training opportunities to medical personnel.

"There's no telling how many accidents there are going to be in the area," she said. "They're out there to save lives and they saved mine."

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.