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Teen's spirits still high one year after snakebite

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Family grateful for support of community

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It was a year ago last Friday that Ashley Vernon of Scottsburg, then 13, fell in the Clark State Forest and stood up to find a snake hanging from her left hand, its fangs sunk into the base of her pinkie and ring finger.

The venom of the snake, a copperhead or a timber rattler, did enough damage to require more than half a dozen operations and pile up more than \$60,000 in medical bills, for which her parents had no insurance.

But a year later, thanks largely to emotional and financial support from friends and strangers, Ashley's grateful parents, Kevin and Sandy Vernon, say the family is doing fine despite the visible damage the bite did to Ashley's arm.

Sitting with her family at home on the eve of the anniversary, Ashley held out her arm and inventoried the bite's effects. Most of the top two joints of her ring finger and the top joint of her pinkie are gone. There is also no feeling in those two fingers.

A scar forms a raised path that runs from the base of those digits through the palm of her hand and up the inside of her forearm to a point a couple of inches above her elbow.

A similar scar extends about a third of the way up the back of her forearm. Her doctor had to make the incisions to relieve pressure that caused the arm to swell twice its normal size.

But none of that has stopped Ashley, an eighth-grader at Scottsburg Middle School, from resuming the life of a normal teenager. She was a cheerleader this year.

She also enjoys playing basketball in the family's driveway. "I wanted to be in gymnastics, but my mom never did put me in it," she said.

Asked what difference the numb and shortened fingers have made, Ashley answered, "None."

Her 12-year-old brother, Ashton, said, "I can beat her in arm wrestling with her left hand."

"No you can't!" she snapped.

The family credits Ashley's recovery to good care at Kosair Children's Hospital in Louisville, where she spent 11 days. They're especially grateful to surgeon Mark Chariker.

"When we first got there her hand was dead and he brought it back to life," Ashley's father said.

The family is also grateful for the financial help they received. Kosair Charities, the charitable arm of Louisville Kosair

Shrine Temple, heard of the family's plight and picked up the hospital tab - more than \$44,000.

Chariker decided not to send the family a bill for his services, which he estimated last year would have been around \$20,000. Public contributions to a bank fund set up for the family paid for months of physical therapy that restored strength and flexibility to Ashley's left arm.

"We appreciated the donations that people gave us ... and all the help that we received," Sandy Vernon said.

"You tell your kids about the rapists and the murderers and how bad the world is," Kevin Vernon said, "and then something like this happens..."

"...And it totally turns it around," Ashley interjected.

Sandy Vernon said she got constant emotional support from her friends and from her boss. "I just couldn't be down because even though this was a bad thing..."

"...The good outweighed the bad," Ashley said.

"After it's all said and done, we're back to being a normal family," her father said.

"Grounded all the time," Ashley said.

"You just get those grades up, you'll be OK," her father responded.

Ashley said she has been back to the Clark State Forest, but not to the spot where she was bitten. "But I've been thinking about going there," she said.

Ashley Vernon has had more than half a dozen surgeries on her hand after a snakebite a year ago. She lost parts of two fingers her arm still shows signs of surgery. Kosair Charities helped finance Ashley's surgeries.

Ashley and her mother, Sandy, left, joked around last week. "We appreciate all the donations that people gave us ... and all the help that we received," Sandy Vernon said.

Ashley Vernon played basketball with her brother Ashton at her home. The snakebite has not deterred Ashley from living a normal life.

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