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Mower robbed boy, 6, of the use of a leg, then a thief took his wagon

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At age 6, Austin Yatalese of Jeffersonville has already learned three of life's toughest lessons: That bad things sometimes happen for no reason. That money is sometimes tight. That people sometimes steal.

Austin lost part of his left knee in a lawn mower accident in April. He can't move far without help. His doctor says it might be Christmas before he is able to walk normally again.

After he got out of the hospital, Austin's parents bought him a spiffy green wagon - similar to one he had used while hospitalized - so they could pull him around town.

They didn't want him to be stuck inside on beautiful summer days.

But, early last Sunday morning, someone stole Austin's wagon from his front yard. And his parents can't afford to replace it.

How do you explain to a 6-year-old boy that life can be crushingly unfair?

"I'm not sure there's an easy way," said April Yatalese, Austin's mother. "I'm trying to get his life back to normal. It's hard to do when part of that - the wagon - is gone."

It's also hard to do when you have two other children to look after, 3-year-old Ashlee and 9-month-old Savannah. That's why the simple wagon meant so much to the Yatalese family.

"I could put the baby in the stroller and Austin and his sister in the wagon," said April Yatalese. "We could all go to the park or the store. Austin could hold onto the sides of the wagon and push himself up."

Said Austin: "I played in it. I had fun with my baby sister in the wagon. My friends would pull me in it."

April Yatalese and her husband, Billy, bought the wagon and a used PlayStation with about \$150 collected by about 15 of his co-workers at National Equipment Services in Louisville, where he works as a mechanic.

"It makes you happy when you realize you have people who care about you," Billy Yatalese said.

David Coulter, the parts manager at the company, said co-workers ``just wanted to help him. He was going through a rough time."

That rough time began about dusk on April 20, when Austin's grandfather, Alan Herthel, accidentally backed into the boy with a riding lawn mower at his home in Greenville.

The lawn mower blades cut a ``palm-sized" piece of muscle from Austin's left knee, said Dr. John Eldridge, an orthopedist on staff at Kosair Children's Hospital in Louisville.

The blades also sliced into Austin's left thigh bone, damaging the growth plate, the part of the bone that contains growth instructions.

``This injury may affect the later growth of the leg and may require later surgery," Eldridge said.

Austin spent two weeks at Kosair.

At first April Yatalese didn't know he'd been taken there by paramedics. She had been at McDonald's, getting Austin and his sisters a treat when the accident happened.

``My dad runs out of his house, and he tells me he ran over Austin," she said of her return to her father's house. ``I went to Floyd (Memorial Hospital in New Albany) because we thought they had taken him there. He wasn't there. I couldn't talk. I couldn't breathe. I felt like I was going to pass out."

By the time she saw Austin she had calmed down and started to put things in perspective.

``He was alive. I thought, `If he ends up losing a leg, he's still the same Austin.' "

But that didn't happen. Eldridge and a colleague, Dr. Mark Chariker, reconstructed Austin's leg, which sports a still-banded knee and a 5inch scar.

Austin doesn't recall much of the accident beyond flashes of metal and pain and darkness.

``It was night," he said. ``I was under the lawn mower. I was crying. It hurt."

What Austin does remember are the nice nurses at Kosair and the wagons they pulled him in while he recuperated. Eldridge said Kosair ``has used wagons for years to move the kids through the hospital."

That's where Billy Yatalese got the idea for Austin's wagon. And he can't believe it's gone.

``It's really upsetting to me that someone would steal the wagon," he said. ``I can't understand how someone could do this to a kid who can't walk."

April Yatalese said she can't believe it either. She wishes she could afford to buy Austin another one.

But, she said, gesturing about her house, there are ``diapers to change and formula to buy and bills to pay."

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