

WEST ORANGE CHRONICLE

West Orange doctor helps burn patient resume his life

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After almost three years of rehabilitative and reconstructive treatments, Seton Hall University student Al Llanos wants to move on with life as a student. He has resumed classes that were cut short by a fierce blaze that ran through the hallways of a Seton Hall University dormitory in 2000.

Llanos, 22, credit a West Orange plastic surgeon, Dr. Mokhtar Asaadi, for reconstructing his body from the waist up and helping him regain the normal life of a student.

Llano, then 18, was one of the students who survived the Jan. 9, 2000, blaze that ran through the hallways of the main lounge of Boland Hall.

That fire took the lives of three students and injured 58 others.

"I was sleeping. My roommate woke me. ... We opened the door and it was all dark. We got on our knees and started crawling. The more we crawled, the hotter it became. Then I lost my roommate. ... I tried to get out but a fireball hit me in the back. Maybe it was the ceilings falling," Llanos said of that tragic incident.

Two students were recently arrested in connection with the Boland Hall fire, which killed students Frank Caltabilota, Aaron Karol and John Giunta.

Joseph LePore and Sean Ryan, both 22 and from Florham Park, were charged with arson, reckless

manslaughter, three counts of felony murder and 53 counts of aggravated assault.

But on that fateful morning of January 2000, Llanos suffered 56 third degree burns on his body, including back, abdomen, chest, neck, shoulders and face. He lay in a coma at St. Barnabas Hospital for three months and remained there for an additional two months before being transferred to a rehabilitation center for two more months.

Llanos returned to his home in Hawthorne on July 20, 2000, and began receiving treatments of Kenalog injections and laser treatments from Asaadi.

Kenalog injections - a semi-artificial cortisone derivative - are useful in suppressing inflammation in the short term, and in the long term, dissolving scar tissues, stabilizing the body defenses, speeding the healing process and causing cysts to disappear.

Asaadi, whose office is located at 101 Old Short Hills Road in West Orange, is a reconstructive and cosmetic surgeon.

Because Llanos had a lot of scar tissue in various parts of his body, he was not able to move his arms upward or laterally, turn his neck in both directions, or move his shoulders freely. This hindered Llanos from performing any normal, day-to-day activities such as getting dressed or lifting a fork at dinner.

The treatments, however, slowly made Llanos more mobile and helped him get back to a point where he was able to move about with less difficulty.

Asaadi performed surgery to move Llanos' chest muscle over to his arm area, so there would be available muscle tissue for stretching and movement.

Again, in an effort to have Llanos' neck rotate in a normal manner, the doctor removed one of Llanos' stomach muscles and placed it in Llanos' neck, allowing for side-to-side motion.

On Llanos' face, Asaadi needed to re-create his lip and chin, remove existing fat and place tissue expanders in his scalp to stretch the area where Llanos had hair on his neck, as to compensate for the baldness on his head.

"We do this for many patients," Asaadi said. "We have worse patients than him. This is not the worst one we have seen."

Asaadi said that Llanos is now back to normal life. Asaadi added that tragic incidents like that experienced by Llanos is not the end of life.

"There are many things that can be done," he said. "This takes many years, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. You do not have to go far away. We have it here in New Jersey."

Looking back, life has drastically changed for Llanos.

In 2000, Llanos was a typical freshman hoping to make the Seton Hall baseball team. Today, he is a survivor with more regard to life's simple things such as being able to drive a new car, play sports and just spend quality time with family and friends.

Llanos' journey to recovery has been long, with monthly visits to the doctor.

Llanos, who was majoring in computer science before the tragedy, is now studying physical therapy. He said his goal then was to graduate, have a good career and be happy. He is still determined to attain that goal.

"I wanted everything to work out and help my family. I wanted to get a good job, help my family and buy a house," he said, adding that the fire changed his perspective of life.

"It changed my whole life. I had to start all over again. Learn how to do things again - eat, walk. People take things for granted. These things can be taken from you easily," he said. "I'm looking at life differently. Life is very precious."

Llano has made good progress. He is taking part-time classes and playing some sports.

"I'm making great progress. It takes time. It is tough. It is frustrating, but you have to deal with it," Llanos said. "I try to do my best to live a normal life but it is hard and frustrating."