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**CONTACT: DEBORAH ROBERTS PUGH
(662) 377-3712**

ASTHMA ATTACK CHANGED WEST POINT RESIDENT'S LIFE

TUPELO, Miss.—Joneeta Head of West Point has been dealing with asthma since she was 7 years old, but nothing prepared her for the events of last winter.

“When I was younger, I was a cheerleader and was in the band. I was very active,” said Head, 26. “I would get winded sometimes, but I don’t ever remember having any bad asthma attacks.” She sailed through high school and the University of Mississippi in Oxford with no major asthma flare-ups. After graduation from Ole Miss, she moved back to her hometown of West Point and went to work for Cellular South.

“Asthma is a serious disease that varies from mild intermittent to severe persistent,” said Ben Moore, M.D., a pulmonologist with Pulmonary Consultants of Tupelo. “The trouble is that all individuals with asthma are at risk for a sudden severe attack and sudden death without appropriate controller medication, such as inhaled steroids or a leukotriene inhibitor such as Singulair.

“Many young people in particular rely solely on rescue medication such as albuterol but may experience a sudden severe, life-threatening attack in which the rescue medication may not work effectively.”

Around 2007, she began having an asthma attack once a year, usually around March and spurred by spring allergies. “Every year around March I would have an attack, and it would usually come at night,” she said. “I would end up in the Emergency Room getting a breathing treatment.” This went on for three years without incident, until Dec. 27, 2009.

“I came home from a friend’s house and went to bed,” she said. “I woke up and went to my Mom’s room and told her I was having an asthma attack.” They started for the car to head to the Emergency Room, but Head doesn’t remember much after that.

“My Mom says I kept falling down on the way to the car and that I kept saying I was dying,” she said. When they made it to the car, Head collapsed. Her mother called 9-1-1, and the ambulance took her to North Mississippi Medical Center-West Point for emergency treatment. From there, she was flown by CareFlight to NMMC in Tupelo, where she spent time in the Intensive Care Unit with a ventilator helping her breathe.

“Asthma causes brain injury due to severe respiratory failure, leading to low oxygen levels in the blood going to the brain,” Dr. Moore said. “This can cause strokes, seizures, coma and death very rapidly.” In Head’s case, her vision was dramatically impaired, as were her motor skills.

Once she was more stable, Head transferred to NMMC’s Rehabilitation Institute to start the long journey back to independence. “My reaction time in conversation was slow. My balance was off,” she said. “I pretty much had to relearn how to do everything for myself.”

Head worked hard every day with physical, occupational and speech-language therapists. Her vision slowly started to improve. “Everyone’s face was blurred at first, and then I could start to see facial features,” she said. “The next week I could tell a person’s eye color and see if someone was wearing earrings.”

Therapists helped her with hand-eye coordination and handwriting. After five weeks at the NMMC Rehabilitation Institute, she was discharged home and began outpatient rehabilitation at NMMC-West Point. “I would like to thank all my doctors and therapists in Tupelo and West Point for being so kind to me and my family,” she said.

Brian Condit, M.D., a physical medicine and rehabilitation physician who serves as medical director of NMMC’s Rehabilitation Institute, said anoxic brain injury is more common than most people realize because of near drowning or heart attack with prolonged resuscitation. Until it happened to her, Head said she had no idea asthma could be so dangerous.

“A controller medication taken every day can prevent an attack or make it less severe so that it is not life threatening,” Dr. Moore said. “These medications consist of inhaled steroids, Singulair, and long acting bronchodilators. They must be taken daily to prevent sudden severe attacks like Joneeta’s that can and do cause death.”

Dr. Moore says asthma education, especially among young people with asthma, is critical, as is regular follow-up with a physician or nurse practitioner.

While she’s not yet able to return to work, Head has come a long way since last December. “My biggest obstacle right now is reading. It’s hard for me to go line by line without skipping down the page,” she said. “But I am able to do a lot more for myself now.”

Dr. Condit credits her success to determination and family support. “Miss Head was very motivated to get better and get her life back,” Dr. Condit said. “Her mother was also very supportive and helped her with activities toward her recovery. She helped her daughter stay focused and not give up. They were a great team.”

For more information about NMMC's rehabilitation services in West Point and Tupelo, or for help managing asthma, call 1-800-THE DESK (1-800-843-3375).

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Suggested Cutline:

Joneeta Head of West Point worked hard to gain back her independence after a severe asthma attack caused brain injury. Her mother, Janice Tate, was instrumental in her rehabilitation.