

A great story this morning to talk about. Twenty years ago, a hit-and-run accident left 18-year-old Sara Scantlin with massive brain injuries, unable to speak with anyone. Until now.

Here's David Mattingly this morning.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

DAVID MATTINGLY, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): The last time Sara Scantlin was able to speak it was more than 20 years ago, the moment she walked into the glaring lights of a drunk driver. The hit- and-run left her battered, broken and unable to speak.

BETSY SCANTLIN, MOTHER: She knows who we are, and she can't communicate with us.

MATTINGLY: John Moore, now a police detective, was a witness to Sara's hit-and-run.

JOHN MOORE, POLICE DETECTIVE: We saw her fly through the air probably at least 20 feet into the air and landed on her head.

MATTINGLY: It happened here, on a dark, two-lane road outside their hometown at Hutchinson, Kansas, as they left a party.

(on camera): When you saw that accident, did you think that there was any way she could survive?

MOORE: No, I thought she was probably -- if she wasn't dead, she was going to probably die.

JIM SCANTLIN, FATHER: The phone rings about midnight. My wife answers it, pulls my big toe and says, "We've got to get to the hospital. Something bad has happened to Sara."

MATTINGLY (voice over): But now, more than 20 years later, and 38 years old, her family calls her a medical miracle, as she suddenly regained the ability to talk.

J. SCANTLIN: I got on the phone, and she said, "Hi, Dad." And she's, again, 100 percent Sara. She's using of all her capacity to the maximum. And that's a real inspiration. Sara is back. And that's the best gift in the world.

MATTINGLY: David Mattingly, CNN, Hutchinson, Kansas.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HEMMER: Which takes us to some obvious questions this morning. How could such an

amazing awakening come about?

Dr. Sanjay Gupta is with us now at the CNN center.

Sanjay, good morning to you. Answer that first question first. How does this happen?

SANJAY GUPTA, CNN MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT: Well, you know, Bill, I think what this tells us more than anything else is there are a lot of things about the brain that we just still don't know.

Certainly what happens is after a brain injury, the brain is constantly trying to use other parts of the brain other than the part that was damaged to try and reprogram itself, to re-circuit itself, to try and compensate. Typically that takes place over 18 months to two years, which is why a lot of doctors will say, you don't expect a lot of gains after that two-year mark.

Twenty years later, I think this is remarkable. Certainly, any doctor would say this is something to be written up in the journals.

HEMMER: It has been reported, though, she has been able to communicate with hand gestures or some sort of signs over the past two decades. How many signs? And what more have you found out about that?

GUPTA: Yes, you know, a couple things here. First of all, a coma is a more specific term. Being that she was aware of people around her, being that she was able to communicate although not through the spoken word, she really wasn't in a coma the way that most people think of it. She actually had a condition known as aphasia, which is a sort of a big term. But basically neurosurgeons use that to say -- describe people who can't speak. Why again she would start to get some of that function back, a little bit of a mystery. But the fact that she could communicate to some extent beforehand, maybe a little bit of a better prognostic indicator than someone who just wasn't even aware of people even around her.

HEMMER: So, you're talking about two decades here, Sanjay. What about brain damage now? What about chances for full recovery?

GUPTA: Yes.

HEMMER: Is it even a possibility?

GUPTA: You know, it's interesting. I would normally say, I think, in good conscience, that it would be unlikely that you would have a full recovery even now. But, you know, this is a girl who has broken some rules here. You know, nobody expected this. So, it's hard to say what's she's going to look like a year or two years from now. I would describe her as someone who clearly had a severe brain injury to the left side her brain, starting to make some gains 20 years later. She could continue to do that, Bill.

HEMMER: We asked this question a few moments ago. You're a neurosurgeon. Do you consider this a miracle?

GUPTA: You know, everyone in medicine, I think, is hesitant to use the word "miracle." It's certainly very remarkable, although I think it's the closest thing that we see in terms of miracles in terms of the patients that we see every day -- Bill.

HEMMER: Thank you, Sanjay.

GUPTA: Thank you.