

A Distant Trauma

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I will be at the parades this year, but I will be on the back row unless I wear goggles,” says Estelle Stapleton, a 60-year-old-plus Uptowner with Mardi Gras in her veins. Stapleton (not her real name) is a lifelong New Orleanian who has always been involved with the parades, courts and balls. “Usually, I watch the parades on Napoleon. Last Mardi Gras, my daughter and grandchildren were Downtown on St. Charles Avenue below Poydras, and I was with them.” All of a sudden a masker threw a spear that pierced Stapleton’s left eye. Since last Fat Tuesday, she has had almost weekly appointments with corneal and retinal experts at Ochsner Foundation Clinic who saved her vision. “I immediately knew my eye was injured. A nurse was nearby and looked at my eye. The pupil was totally [destroyed], and parts of my eye were coming out. It was literally chewed up at the point of impact. I was losing vitreous fluid. “Thank goodness I was able immediately to get to the emergency room at Ochsner. Then I was in surgery for four hours. In all, I have had five surgical procedures. My lens was removed. I have no cilia or iris. There is a scar across my cornea from 2 to 9 o’clock. My retina was torn but not detached. “Finally my eye is healing nicely. I was told it would take a year, and it has. My

cornea is healing slowly, but I am not a candidate for a corneal transplant because of the injury to the surrounding tissues. I am experimenting with a hard contact lens several hours a day to help me focus. With the lens, my vision is 20/50 in the left eye. Fortunately, the vision in my other eye is 20/20,” adds Stapleton. **Taking Care** Stapleton attributes her recovery to the excellent care she received from ophthalmologists at Ochsner and especially to the diligent efforts of retinal specialist Dr. Larry Arlend and corneal specialist Dr. Richard Selzer. “I don’t know who threw the spear who hit me, and I don’t want to know. And I don’t want you to even mention the name of the krewe. I’m simply thankful for three things: My granddaughter, whom I was holding, was not hurt, I was able to get immediately to Ochsner, and I’m healing well due to wonderful medical care. “Large objects like spears and bags of beads should not be thrown from floats, but I am not angry. No malice was intended. My late husband used to bombard us with things when he rode floats. “If objects with a potential to cause injury must be on floats, they should be handed to the crowds like Zulu does with the coconuts ... There are a lot of incidents we don’t hear about. Mardi Gras is all about fun, and throws are a part of the spirit, but some can really be dangerous,” concludes Stapleton. **Bones and joints** The busiest doctors during Carnival are probably orthopedic surgeons. Dr. Lee Moss was on unreferral call for East Jefferson General Hospital’s emergency room about five Carnivals ago. “A woman was on a float in Metairie that caught on fire. She jumped off and broke her knee. It was a really nasty fracture. Being on orthopedic call on Mardi Gras can be a disaster, especially trying to get around the city between emergency rooms. “Another man came in that afternoon with a crushed foot. A truck tire rolled over his foot. I don’t think it even broke the skin, but he had a mush foot with multiple fractures and dislocations of both his ankle and foot. I was in the operating room most of the afternoon and evening,” says Moss. Lee Radazzo (not his real name) was the man with the crushed foot. Like many New Orleanians, he was born in Southern Baptist Hospital and now lives with his family in Jefferson Parish. He spoke with me just after returning from the LSU/Alabama football game. “I was 49 years old at the time. There were legalities involved, but it is now over except for my lifelong injury. I am the production manager for a business that sells some Mardi Gras stuff,” says Radazzo. “My wife and our youngest son, who was 12 at the time, were watching the Mardi Gras parades on Veterans Boulevard. We got to the parade route about 9:30 a.m. I drank coffee all morning and then drank about half a beer. “At about 2 p.m. the truck parade was stalled. There was a space of about 30 feet between the back of a float and the next truck. A little girl from out of town was with us. I went to the back of the float to get her some beads from a buddy. I bent down to pick up the beads about 4 or 5 feet from the back of the float. “The truck behind me started up and rolled over my right foot, pinning it under the tire and throwing me to the ground. People in the crowd saw it and became frantic. They screamed at the driver to stop. He put the truck in reverse and rolled off my crushed foot and ankle. “A golf cart carried me to a nearby ambulance. I went to the East Jefferson emergency room. Dr. Lee Moss took me to surgery and did a wonderful job of putting my bones back together with five pins and screws. All my ligaments and tendons were crushed. “Then I had a second surgery to remove the pins and was on crutches for two more months. After the pins were removed, there were problems with the skin healing. I had a lot of débridements and whirlpool treatments. My foot was so swollen that I had to wear one of those Velcro shoes for over a year. The skin remains very thin and breaks out with any little bump. “I still have swelling and circulation problems. There’s pain when the weather changes. My lower leg and foot swell any time I do any significant walking, and sometimes I limp. People ask, ‘Why are you limping? First I said, ‘Long story,’ and they always asked what happened. I got tired of talking about it. Now I just say I have arthritis,” he adds. Radazzo believes Mardi Gras routes would be safer with full barricades. “There are barricades at all the turns, but barricades are missing from many straight-run sections on Veterans, especially when the parades come out of Clearview and go up Vets against the usual traffic pattern,” he says. Like Stapleton, Radazzo chose not to pursue a legal case against the krewe, but he did sue the driver of the truck who rolled over his foot. (In a truck parade, the riders of each individual float usually hire a truck and driver to pull it.) On the advice of his lawyer, Radazzo settled out of court last year for an amount between \$50,000 and \$100,000. His lawyer advised him that the eyewitnesses favorable to his position became hard to locate and that a Carnival-loving Jefferson Parish jury might not look kindly on a plaintiff suing over a Mardi Gras incident. “The captains of the krewes should pay more attention to safety. Some of them don’t even want to hear about any accidents. I knew the captain of the krewe involved in my injury. I didn’t get a letter or phone call – nothing. I ran into the captain about two years later, and he finally acknowledged my injury. ‘Oh, how is that foot?’ he asked. “I really like Mardi Gras so much, Radazzo

concludes. "I have ridden on many floats, but I stopped going to Mardi Gras parades. I lost interest after my accident. I just can't believe what people will do for a trinket." •