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TIME FOR OTHERS: Gail Gunn says personal tragedies have spurred her to become more involved in community programs.

Coma survivor sings message of hope

Close call with death motivates Cobb woman to help out others

By Deborah Matthews
Staff Writer

As Gail Gunn sits down with her family to a meal of turkey, stuffing, and fresh vegetables from her mother's garden Thursday, she and her family will give thanks for more than good food.

This will be the first Thanksgiving Ms. Gunn has spent with her family since a 1983 car accident left her in a 52-day coma — an experience she said inspired her to devote her life to helping others.

On Aug. 14, 1983, Ms. Gunn left her job as a real estate broker and turned her 1980 Oldsmobile 98 left onto Akers Mill Road near Cumberland Mall. She was headed to pick up her 16-year-old daughter and eight foster children. Ahead of her, she saw a Ford Pinto hit a car, turn 360 degrees and leave the ground as it headed for her.

"The impact was so severe that it fused the metals of the cars together," said the Cobb County resident as she described the accident.

The driver of the Pinto and his girlfriend were killed, and a friend

in that car was critically injured. They had been on the river and drinking, Ms. Gunn said. The driver of the third car was also killed.

Emergency personnel took an hour to cut Ms. Gunn out of the car, all the while afraid that the vehicle would explode because gas was leaking from the fuel tank.

Ms. Gunn was conscious while workers tried to free her. She said an off-duty nurse, whose name she never learned, crawled into the car with her and held her until she was taken to the hospital.

The woman stayed with her "knowing that the car could have exploded at any time," said Ms. Gunn. "They tried to pull her off, but she refused to leave."

Ms. Gunn said the woman, whom she calls the "Mystery

Lady," talked with her and kept her from thinking about how badly she was injured. Ms. Gunn lapsed into the coma after she was taken to the hospital. She didn't regain consciousness until November.

Her massive internal injuries, broken bones and severe lacerations have required 15 operations to repair. Her medical bills amounted to \$225,000.

Ms. Gunn said if she could locate the "Mystery Lady" this holiday she would say "thank you for giving me peace and hope. I strive to give that gift to another."

For various reasons, the family was unable to be together at

Hope

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Thanksgiving for the past two years. But this year, Ms. Gunn and her parents took the green beans, sweet corn, and okra grown in her mother's garden here in Atlanta along as they flew to see her sister and brother-in-law's new home in Colorado.

Since the accident, the inspiration to give peace and hope to others is strong, and she pursues that goal aggressively. Before the accident, she helped bring a local chapter of Straight Inc., a non-profit youth drug and alcohol rehabilitation program to Atlanta because of her own daughter's drug problems. She continued her in-

volvement after her daughter left the program and is past president of the Booster Club. More than 30 foster children from Straight have stayed in her home.

She also works as a volunteer with rape victims at Grady Memorial Hospital's Rape Crisis Center and counsels cancer patients.

The accident, however, was not her first encounter with death. At 29, she was told to get her will in order because she had possibly fatal uterine cancer. Now, rid of the disease, Ms. Gunn said she feels there was a purpose for her close call. It was "not to hurt me, but to teach me how to help others with cancer."

Learning how to help others is the way she has coped with a num-

ber of family tragedies, including her own accident, the cancer and her daughter's drug abuse. She said she has tried to use "all that life has thrown at me, all the hell, all the happiness" as inspiration in her work for others. "And now I have more time to share."

She smiled widely as she stopped talking and pulled out the pictures from her daughter's April marriage to a man who was also in the Straight program.

The telephone rings frequently, and she uses a big calendar book to keep track of every moment.

Her voice cracked as she explained "every moment is so precious to me. There is no heaven and there is no hell. There is just this moment and how we use it."