

Beating victim far from out of the woods; no arrests

By Kathryn Reed

"Right now we just hope he does not stop breathing."

If he does, it means Derek Penaranda will likely have died.

Penaranda's parents are hoping and praying their son will survive the beating he sustained in a South Lake Tahoe bar last weekend. Today he is clinging to life in a coma at Renown Medical Center in Reno.

Penaranda, who is called Zippy by everyone who knows him, was in town to celebrate his 30th birthday with family and friends. They had rented a place in the Tahoe Keys.



Derek "Zippy" Penaranda and Katie Musselwhite planned to get married one day.
Photo/Provided

Before two taxis took the group of friends to Mo's Place, the gang had spent part of last Saturday kayaking in the canals of the Keys, with some going out to the lake.

Because Penaranda was born on his parents' anniversary, they have seldom celebrated it – instead deferring to their son. This year was different. Both occasions were being celebrated in Lake Tahoe.

That celebration took a tragic turn when a phone call came in the early hours of May 20 telling Debbie and Wayne Penaranda to get to Barton Memorial Hospital.

What sticks with Wayne Penaranda is overhearing someone in the emergency room say how when his son was turned over on the floor of the bar he was blue.

“At that time I expected the worst possible outcome primarily on what I know about those types of injuries ... when you are deprived of oxygen,” Penaranda told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He said he doesn't know the particulars that resulted in his son being punched unconscious as well as the owner of the bar, Mo Patel.

No one at Mo's would talk to *Lake Tahoe News* on May 25, but said Patel was expected in this weekend.

South Tahoe police are also not releasing details of the fight or the investigation.

What Penaranda said he was told is no one was allowed to approach his son as he laid on the floor of the bar not breathing. It was first responders who got him breathing again.

At Renown a cat scan showed Zippy's vertebrae and spinal cord were intact, and that his skull was not fractured. But there was swelling and bleeding in the brain.

“He had numerous contusions on his chest and back where he was kicked and stomped,” Penaranda said of his son. “His heart had stopped.”

An EEG showed brain activity.

On Tuesday it was time for an MRI.

"The MRI showed extensive cerebral cortex damage," Penaranda said.

The Penarandas returned home to Ripon, in the San Joaquin Valley, with only two of their three sons. They are back in Reno this weekend to be with Zippy. Penaranda said it's been a constant flow of people to the hospital. The people in the small agriculture town have been showing their support for the family, including setting up a Facebook page and arranging for a barbecue to honor Zippy on Sunday. (That will be at noon at Mistlin Sports Park, Ripon.)

Zippy has been living with his longtime girlfriend Katie Musselwhite. The Penarandas expected they'd be married one day and provide them with grandchildren. Zippy works for California Living and Energy in Ceres.

For now, though, his job is to fight for his life.

"Medically, the next phase is for them to stabilize him. Our hope is now he can breath with minimal help from the resuscitation machine and apparatus," Penaranda said with hope. "As soon as he is healthy enough, then a long-term care facility, then hopefully he regains consciousness and then some form of rehabilitation."

If Zippy survives this ordeal, it will be a long road to recovery, and perhaps never to the life he knew.

Bryan Stowe, who was 41 when he was attacked in March 2011 at Dodger game, took months to open his eyes. A website providing updates on Stowe, says, "Bottom line and without sugarcoating anything, Bryan is far from the old Bryan and each day is a struggle."

That beating had 14 detectives on the case in Los Angeles.

South Lake Tahoe Police Department can count its detectives on one hand.

Significant differences, though, are South Tahoe police have the advantage of video (which is not being released to the media) and witnesses.

"We are interviewing everyone who was there, reviewing reports, and doing follow-up interviews as needed," Lt. David Stevenson told *Lake Tahoe News* on May 25.

A taser was used that night, but not by officers, Stevenson said. "It went off, but it did not hit anybody," he said.

As of Friday, no one had been arrested. It's likely attempted murder charges will be filed against at least one person. If Zippy dies, then manslaughter is the presumptive charge.