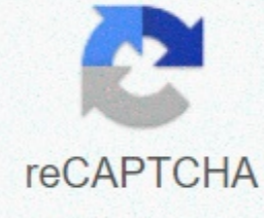




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Kentwood, Mich. - For weeks, the young man sat by the young woman's bed, pouring his heart out to her, praying that she would recover from her injuries. It never occurred to him that maybe she wasn't the woman he loved. But she wasn't. Laura VanRyn was already dead, already buried – and no one knew it. At an emotional memorial Sunday for VanRyn, 22, of Caledonia, Mich., her boyfriend, Aryn Linne, poured his heart out again, telling 2,300 mourners that the bizarre identity switch that allowed those closest to VanRyn to believe they were caring for her in the hospital seemed like a cruel joke. There have been many times over the last few days where I've been angry with God, and I questioned how he could allow this to happen to me, said Linenger, 25. Like it was the biggest trick he's ever played on me in my life. A misidentification at the scene of a crash April 26 along Interstate 69 near Marion, Ind., resulted in a survivor, 19-year-old Whitney Cerak of Gaylord, Mich., who is tagged as VanRyn. A similarity between the two - students at Taylor University in Upland, Ind. Along with Cerak's bruises and swollen face, VanRyn allowed family and friends to believe that it was she who they cared for her first in a hospital and then later in a rehabilitation facility. Meanwhile, Cerak's parents buried VanRyn, believing she was their daughter. The mistake was discovered last week when Cerak identified himself to hospital staff. VanRyn remains engraved until the excavator. Linen brought many to tears in the crowd at the memorial service at Kentwood Community Church, describing how he sat at Cerak's hospital bed, walked around her in a wheelchair and lay in her bed next to her. He and VanRyn had been dating for three years, he says. I saw her hands, her feet and her complexion, and I can't believe it wasn't her, he said. I pray that no one would ever have to go through the pain that I have been through here – that when death comes, you will not be fooled. MISTAKEN IDENTITY: TWO FAMILIES, ONE SURVIVOR, UNWAVERING HOPE, of Don and Susie Van Ryn and Newell, Colleen and Whitney Cerak with Mark Tabb, Howard Books, 275 pages, \$21.99 NBC's Today Show recently put van ryn and cerak families on national television for days to publicize a shocking case of mistaken identity. On April 26, 2006, Laura Van Ryn, Whitney Cerak, Brad Larson, Monica Felver and Laurel Erb were passengers in a van when it was hit violently by a tractor-trailer in northern Indiana. Four of the students were killed in the collision. A young woman was flown to a Fort Wayne hospital and Laura Van Ryn's ID went with her. It was the result of personal belongings strewn around the crash site and into the grass area of the highway. The young woman, believed to be Laura, was in a coma for some time. In the meantime, a funeral was held for Whitney Cerak, 19, a freshman at Taylor University, in Gaylord, Mich. There were 1,400 mourners who attended. No DNA test was performed. When Laura Van Ryn, 21, a senior at the same university, woke up, she was transferred to a rehabilitation facility in Grand Rapids. Still in a neck brace, the girl's facial swelling slowly subsided and she uttered a few sentences that made no sense to the Van Ryn family. Laura's boyfriend was the first to question her identity. When family members called her Laura, she corrected them. When she was asked to write her name on a piece of paper, she wrote Whitney. Suddenly, the Van Ryn family, who had optimistically held a vigil at the girl's bedside, slipped into grief, while the Cerak family, fresh from a funeral, happily realized that their daughter was still alive. The two girls resembled each other, each with long, straight blond hair, similar features and build. Now that Whitney has fully recovered she has returned to Taylor University — where she is a junior. The two families bonded, and Roy Mowery, Grant County, Ind., coroner, resigned. The families decided together to write a book about the incredible experience they had endured. With admirable collaboration, they worked on the book together and trusted the author Mark Tabb to provide perspective and make it chronologically correct. The result is a very interesting story that is emotionally powerful and will draw in the reader with its conversational style. Perhaps the most notable problem for Whitney to solve was to stop feeling guilty for being the only passenger to have survived. Her father told her, Why not you? It could have been anyone who survived. It all just came down to who was sitting there in the van. You don't have to feel guilty for surviving. Email: dennis@desnews.com Zach Myers | Fox59 Taylor University recalls cases of mistaken identity Taylor University recalls a horrific crash in April 2006 that killed four students and an employee. It also led to cases of mistaken identity, when a student believed to have died in the crash actually survived. (Dwight Adams / IndyStar) UPLAND, Ind. Taylor University marks 10 years this week since the horrific crash that killed five people and resulted in a case of mistaken identity that became international news. Several family members of those killed in the crash were among those who attended a special prayer service on the Taylor University campus Monday morning. The crash occurred on the evening of April 26, 2006, according to Fox59. Nine people rode a Taylor University van on I-69, returning from Fort Wayne after setting up for a lunch the following day. Just after 20.m, the van was a few miles from the Marion exit at State Road 18 when a semi truck came over the median and hit the van. Investigators would later learn the driver of the semi, Spencer, had fallen asleep at the wheel before driving off the northbound roadway. The crash killed Taylor University students Brad Larson, Laurel Erb, Betsy Smith, Laura Van Ryn, and university staff woman Monica Felver. In the chaos that ensued, rescuers at the scene of the crash mixed up the identities of Laura Van Ryn and Whitney Cerak. Cerak had survived the crash, but her face was covered in bandages due to a head injury. Van Ryn's parents arrived at Parkview Hospital in Fort Wayne, unaware that their daughter had died, and the injured and bandaged young woman in the hospital bed was actually Cerak. At the same time, Cerak's family learned that Whitney had been killed, even though she was alive and unconscious in the hospital. Laura's sister, Lisa Van Ryn, recalled the confusion during Monday's prayer service. We came to the hospital and took care of who we thought was Laura, but it turned out to be Whitney instead, she said. And we wouldn't learn that until five weeks later. The identity mix-up occurred when an emergency responder mistakenly cut Van Ryn's student ID to the injured Cerak. When Cerak's family arrived at the hospital, they were told that no ID on the body was needed. Days later, about 1,400 Taylor University students attended the funeral and funeral for Cerak. But it was actually the body of Van Ryn that was laid to rest. Taylor University President Eugene Habecker remembered visiting with Van Ryn's parents, Don and Susie, at the hospital and praying for his daughter's recovery. Her head was completely bandaged, and she was obviously still unconscious, Habecker said. I asked Don if I could hold Laura's hand and pray for her. We didn't know it at the time, but I was actually holding Whitney's hand. For weeks, the world believed that Cerak had died in the crash and Van Ryn had been alive. But members of the Van Ryn family began to notice strange differences between their loved one and the injured young woman they cared for. Five weeks after the crash, a therapist asked the young woman to write her name. She could spell Whitney out. Lisa Van Ryn, who had documented treatment and recovery in a blog wrote: It was a misidentification at the time of the accidents and it is eerily similar to the fact that these two young women share. After five weeks of mourning, Whitney Cerak's family was informed that Whitney was still alive. Laura Van Ryn's family had to accept that Laura was gone. Whitney's sister, Carly, later took over the blog and wrote: Shortly after we saw Whitney met our family Van Ryns and our joy for ourselves was pushed aside by the pain we felt for them. It's hard because our joy is their pain. After recovering from his injuries, Cerak returned and graduated from Taylor University a few years later. She married her boyfriend, Matt. and the couple have three children. The incident would later prompt Indiana lawmakers to adopt stricter guidelines for coroners identifying victims of fatal crashes. The accident also prompted more cable barriers to be installed along intergovernmental media. Robert Spencer was later arrested on five counts of reckless homicide. Investigators learned Spencer had falsified his time logs and had been on the road nine hours longer than federal law allows. Spencer pleaded guilty and served two years of a four-year sentence. During Monday's prayer service, Jeff Larson, said he has forgiven the truck driver who caused the crash that killed his brother, Brad. In recent years, my heart has been drawn to respond with forgiveness, Larson said. Although I have not harbored resentment towards the truck driver, Robert Spencer, it took a long time to consider forgiveness. God, by His word, does not promise us freedom from hardship and suffering, Larson continued. But he promises that he will take care of us through these times. Lisa Van Ryn continued a career in physical therapy after witnessing the treatment that helped Cerak recover. She reflected on the last decade of Monday's service. Betsy, Laurel, Monica, Brad and Laura, she said. One thing they have taught us among many others is that life is short. And you don't know what day will be your last. Whitney Cerak (Wheeler) is expected to speak during another prayer service scheduled for Wednesday at Taylor University. This story originally appeared on Fox59.com. Fox59.com.

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