

ALTON TOWERS SMILER VICTIM

EXCLUSIVE

BY VIKKI WHITE

ALTON Towers rollercoaster crash victim Leah Washington today reveals how she nearly died TWICE as medics fought to save her while she was trapped in the wreckage.

In her first interview since the horror smash, the teenager describes in dramatic detail the chilling moment the car she and her boyfriend were riding in ploughed into a stuck empty carriage on the giant Smiler.

She also tells of her terrifying painful ordeal in the aftermath while rescuers battled to free her as she hung in mid-air crushed under the safety bar.

Now two months on 18-year-old Leah, who lost half of her left leg, is still trying to come to terms with the nightmare that has changed her life forever.

She says: "I think of all the people who were in the park that day and I ask myself, why were we at the front of the ride when it happened? Why us? But I wouldn't wish this on anyone else.

"It hasn't really sunk in yet but I'm nervous for the future, because I'll have a different path and a different life. I'm always going to have to put my leg on in the morning or use crutches.

"But I've got to move on and live with it. I just want to start my life again."

The sixth-form student had been dating Joe Pugh, 18, for six weeks when they made a last minute decision on the morning of June 2 to go and have some fun at Alton Towers.

"I wanted to go on Sonic Spinball but Joe said there's no point queuing for ages because it's not that good," says Leah. "He suggested we go on The Smiler.

"I was scared because I'd never been on it before. I wanted to go on a ride I'd already been on.

STUCK

"After an hour and a half wait we were sent to queue for the front row." It was then that Leah first heard there were problems with the £18million ride. "We sat down but they lifted the safety bars up after 10 minutes, saying there was a technical difficulty and we had to get off," she says. "We were waiting ages and I said to Joe, 'let's go'. But when you've queued that long, you wait."

The teens even talked to fellow victims Vicky Balch and Daniel Thorpe about recent problems on the ride. Leah reveals: "They said one of the bolts had fallen off the other day and it had been breaking down a lot."

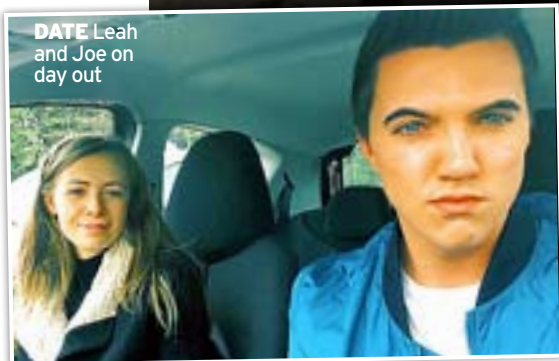
After operators sent test cars around the track, the group got back on the ride. It set off but became stuck on a crest. "It was so windy. It was freezing," Leah recalls. "I thought they were going to take us off the ride and down the safety steps but instead we set off again. We went round and round and round and then we came around this corner."

She shivers and the tears flow as she recalls what happened next. She reveals: "I saw the empty carriage and put my hands out to try to stop, but we crashed. I heard people screaming and people below us started running to the fence.

"I looked at Joe and his finger was hanging off and Daniel had a big cut on his forehead. Then I started to lose feeling in my legs. My left leg was all pushed up and the bar was digging in.

"There was a bit of flesh on the seat in front and I could feel the bone in my knee. I started to panic. I was petrified." As Leah and Joe hung helplessly in the

DANCER
Before the
accident



DATE Leah
and Joe on
day out

air along with a dozen other people in the carriage, scaffolding was erected to reach them as paramedics arrived.

"They cut my coat off, which I wasn't very happy about," says Leah. "And then they gave me gas and air. I only remember odd bits after that - the noise of them cutting me out and lying in an air ambulance. I was trying to look out of the window because it was the first time I'd ever been in a helicopter."

She was later told a team of 30 medics had fought to keep her alive as she came close to death twice while still on the ride - first when she lost a dangerous amount of blood and then when she had to be revived after she stopped breathing.

She was saved by an air ambulance which had transported blood to the

scene from Royal Stoke University Hospital. But it was four agonising hours before the teenager was freed.

Medics at the scene said if temperatures had been lower that day, she wouldn't have survived. How close she came to death is not lost on her mum Louise, an auxiliary nurse, or her father David, a healthcare worker.

"Knowing how lucky Leah is to be here is what gets us through each day," says Louise. "We can deal with what has happened, but we couldn't have dealt with losing her." David reveals he only learnt of his daughter's involvement in the smash when he saw her on TV.

"I was sleeping ahead of a night shift when I woke up," he says. "I put the news on and saw a picture of Leah and Joe on the ride. I recognised his bright blue

coat. It seemed as if they were just stuck, so at that point I wasn't too concerned."

But by the time Leah's parents got to Royal Stoke University Hospital at 9.30pm, her left leg had been amputated above the knee. "An orthopaedic surgeon told us taking Leah's leg saved her life and she wasn't out of the woods yet," says David. "We were devastated."

COMA

Louise, 49, adds: "Vicky Balch's mum later told me she heard me screaming when the doctors told me what had happened. Critically ill, Leah was then put into an induced coma in intensive care. "Doctors told us to talk to Leah," recalls Louise. "She had just passed her driving test so I told her she'd best get better because she'd promised to take

me shopping."

Doctors brought Leah out of her coma the next evening. Louise says: "Her first words were: 'I'm going to be all over the internet because they were taking photos of us when we were injured'.

"Then she whispered to her brother Luke that she couldn't feel her leg. It was heartbreaking."

Leah was visited by her orthopaedic surgeon that night. She doesn't remember the conversation - believing she blocked out the painful memory. But her parents will never forget it.

David, 50, says: "Leah was sobbing. She said, 'don't tell me, don't tell me, I don't want to hear'. She knew." Leah adds: "It took me a long time to look at my injury. And when I did, I burst into tears." She had a final operation on her

I think of all the people in the park that day and ask why me?

ON LOSING LEG IN RIDE HORROR



LIFE CHANGING
Leah's leg was amputated above knee. Inset: Crash

Pictures: ROLAND LEON



HEROES
Leah meets rescuers

“I saw empty carriage as we came round corner and put my hands out to try to stop.”

VICTIM LEAH ON THE MOMENT SMILER CAR CRASHED



RECOVERING
With her parents



GIFTS From wellwishers

leg, three days after the accident and spent the next seven weeks in hospital. “I was in bed for two weeks and because I couldn’t move I got sores,” says Leah. “When I started physio it was hard and I was scared. I used a frame for a while. Then I finally got into a wheelchair.”

The popular teenager had up to 16 visitors at a time. A fortnight in, she met Vicky Balch, 20, who also lost a leg in the crash. “Vicky was in the bed next to me in intensive care but I never realised,” says Leah. “We talked about the accident, which was very emotional.”

“I’d like to meet up with Vicky again and the other victims now, because we’ve got that connection and perhaps we can support each other.”

Leah also fractured the little finger on her left hand in the crash. And she began

to lose feeling in her left arm because a nerve had been crushed. She reveals how her favourite hobby was jazz dancing, which she’d loved since the age of six. She was set to perform in her last show in July before heading to university.

SCAR

But despite the devastating accident, Leah is bravely upbeat. She has a pair of sparkly blue crutches donated by Crystals and Crutches and talks excitedly about being on the guest list for an upcoming gig by her favourite band, One Direction. The boys sent her a video message as letters and gifts from well-wishers poured into the hospital.

“I want to say thank you to everyone,” says Leah, now planning a fundraising event for the medical team who saved

her life. She was discharged from hospital on July 22 and turned 18 six days later. “I didn’t want to be in hospital for my 18th,” she says. “I had a good birthday at home but it just wasn’t what I expected it to be. I’ve missed out on so much.”

This summer, she should have been on holiday with pals in Magaluf before heading off to uni next month to study primary education. Now she even can’t make herself a drink and needs help with personal care, like taking a shower. “I’m not independent any more and I hate it,” says Leah. “I’ve been offered a stairlift but I don’t want it. I’m 18. My granddad offered me a blanket in my wheelchair. I said no, I’m not 90.” Leah’s right knee bears a brutal scar from where it was

sewn back together. Deep scars are visible on her calf and she has a small one on her forehead.

She hasn’t had nightmares or experienced flashbacks, but when Leah uses her wheelchair, she can sometimes feel her amputated leg swinging. “I get phantom pains,” she says. “Some are like a burning sensation, some an electric shock. On a night they’re really bad. I can’t sleep and I’m reduced to tears.”

Leah has been measured for a prosthetic leg, but it will be a long, drawn-out process as she is still growing. Her mum says: “We’re having to move out of our house into a bungalow, which is a bit heart-

breaking. We’ve lived here 21 years. All our family memories are here.”

Meanwhile, a Health and Safety Executive investigation is taking place into the cause of the crash, and Leah has been awarded interim compensation. Lawyer Paul Paxton, a partner and head of the personal injury department at Stewarts Law, says: “You would expect the awards to run to millions. It’s not just about now, it’s 60 years ahead.”

Leah, of Barnsley, South Yorks, received a written apology from Alton Towers. She says: “The ride shouldn’t have been running, but I’m still waiting to find out what happened.”

“I don’t feel angry but I’d like to know what went wrong. Not to blame anybody, but to stop it happening again.”