



Grace Ueng, 40, gets physical therapy from Blair Tanner in Raleigh in February. Ueng, founder and president of Savvy Marketing, has been able to maintain her success despite nearly breaking her neck bicycling on a California mountain in September.

STAFF PHOTO BY TRAVIS LONG

grace under pressure

When Triangle entrepreneur Grace Ueng was hurt in a cycling accident last year, she learned to slow down. Clients learned they still can't keep up with her.

BY VICKI LEE PARKER
STAFF WRITER

The day Grace Ueng turned 40 she was in the intensive care unit at a California hospital without a clue where she was or why she was there. She was wearing a neck brace, and strings of IVs and cords were trailing from her body.

Doctors told her that she had been found by a motorcyclist who had seen her lying on the side of a trail going down Sonoma Mountain and been transported by helicopter and medically evacuated to Santa Rosa.

She had a fractured neck and serious brain and back injuries. No one, least of all Ueng, knew how serious her situation was, the extent of her brain injuries, or whether she'd ever be able to work again.

"It was scary," says Richard Holcomb, a friend and chief executive of StrikeIron, a Durham software company. "You can't see brain trauma. So you have questions like, 'Will you remember again? Will there be a loss of mental capacity?' ... You don't realize how fragile the brain is. It's scary when you depend on it."

By the end of the week, Ueng was orchestrating her own crisis control from her hospital bed. Holcomb, who had flown out to California to be with her, had Ueng's Blackberry and was e-mailing her clients and associates, updating them on her progress, reassuring them



Grace Ueng had brain trauma after a bike crash on her 40th birthday.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GRACE UENG



Grace Ueng, center, speaks with client David Bass, right, chief financial officer for Unit Dose Solutions, and pharmacist Bonnie Bass about the company's operations, in Morrisville in January. Ueng is the president of Savvy Marketing.

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GRACE

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that business would continue as usual, that Ueng was still in charge.

Within days she was out of the hospital, and back in Raleigh soon after. Doctors here told her it would be three months before she could go back to work, that she had to give her brain time to heal.

They hadn't counted on the "Grace factor."

"Whatever timetable the doctor gave her, she had the Grace timetable, which was substantially less," says Tom Hanlon, a friend and a client and CEO of AllShred.

Driven to succeed

Grace Ueng is a Type A. Driven. Hard working. Ambitious. The youngest daughter of Chinese immigrants, Ueng grew up in Atlanta. Her father was a professor at Georgia Tech but she remembers few luxuries as a child. She was studious from the start. Her seventh-grade science project was a study of the viscosity of molasses and other fluids. It placed in the regional competition. Her father wanted Ueng to be an engineer.

She ended up at MIT and won class president at the end of freshman year. At 23, she was in Harvard's business school.

She came to the Triangle 10 years ago and quickly earned a reputation as the one to call if you wanted to launch a new product, rebrand your company or expand your market share.

As the vice president of marketing for OpenSite Technologies, she led a campaign resulting in the Durham company's acquisition by Siebel Systems for \$542 million. She did the same at other Triangle companies such as Togethersoft, which was acquired by Borland Software, and at SmartPath, which was sold to DoubleClick. She esti-



Ueng gets physical therapy from Blair Tanner. She had three months of therapy after her bike wreck.

STAFF PHOTO BY TRAVIS LONG

mates that her work on the executive teams of various companies over the years has earned investors returns of at least \$1 billion.

Three years ago, Ueng decided to start her own company. She began working her network to generate leads. Not hard for a woman with friends and associates around the globe. Savvy Marketing Group was still establishing itself when Ueng had her accident, but already her client list included some of the area's top companies — Geomagic, John Deere, First Research, Alternat Access and AllShred.

When news of her accident reached the Triangle, it spread quickly through the business community, going from one e-mail in-box to another.

Her clients rallied around her. Most saw her as a friend as well as a business associate. Jerry Heneghan, CEO of Virtual Heroes, was worried about her 9-year-old son, Nicholas.

"It was shocking," he said "We didn't know the severity."

Ueng was helping Virtual Heroes, which makes serious games and simulations for the military and other industries, with its marketing strategy and fundraising. Waiting for Ueng to heal put the company behind, but Heneghan never considered taking his business elsewhere.

"Grace is irreplaceable," he says. "You cannot swap her out."

Friends, neighbors and members of her church, White Plains United Methodist, also came to her aid. They formed a 24-7 care team until Ueng's elderly parents arrived. Her ex-husband took care of their son. Ueng can't remem-

ber who else did what. And it frustrates her not knowing all the people to thank for their kindness. But she remembers that people cooked her meals, transported her back and forth to doctor visits, gave her baths and changed her linen.

Her biggest worry was her short-term memory. She could remember what she wore on her prom night but not a movie she had seen just a month before the accident.

"It was very, very scary," she says.

She had always kept detailed notes and e-mail. So when she had insomnia, Ueng would get up and pore over her files to exercise her mind, fill the gaps in her memory.

She sent e-mail to close friends asking them to prompt her memory: "How do I know this person? Where did I meet them?"

Others saw her struggling, too. Hanlon remembers her e-mail notes in particular. Before the accident, they were concise, precise with details, and never a grammatical mistake. During her recovery — when she wasn't supposed to be working — the messages were short and choppy "like the rest of us communicate," he says.

"It was interesting to watch them progress to the old Grace."

Climbing back

One of the worst things that can happen to a young company is to have its owner flat on her back.

Customers may be understanding at first, but if you're not back at the top of your game soon, they will go elsewhere. They have their business to consider, too.

Ueng knew that. She was de-

termined to get back. The doctors said three months. She fought them at first, but then calmed down. After all, she couldn't move her neck.

But she rested in her own way. People gave her DVDs; she didn't watch them. No wallowing on the couch. She put together scrapbooks with her son. Some days they went fishing. She went to physical therapy for three months.

She didn't stop thinking about work.

Before the accident, Ueng had been gathering data for a client. After the accident, finishing that one project became her personal goal.

"I set a deadline, three weeks," Ueng says. "I wanted to prove to myself that I could do as good a job as ever."

She presented the report on Nov. 21. Her 75-year-old father drove her to the meeting; she had just gotten permission to phase out of the neck brace.

Before Christmas, she was meeting with clients. By January, she was working full time.

"I would have expected a slower pace, but it was absolutely the contrary," says Heneghan. We can't keep up with Grace."

Hitting a rock

Ueng learned to ride a bike in 2002 to compete in triathlons. Endurance sports are relaxing to her. So when she was thinking of something "really cool" she could do for her 40th birthday, she settled on a biking trek in Sonoma, Calif.

On the third day of the trip, Ueng and the six other cyclists decided to take on a steep winding mountain trail. After a grueling 3-mile trek up Sonoma Mountain, they reached the top. The guide asked, "How are you doing?" Ueng answered, "Fine," and began descending the curvy mountain side.

Ueng has no memory of the accident, nor has anyone come forth with any details about what caused her to be forcefully thrown from her bike. She thinks she reached speeds of 40 mph. She thinks she may have hit a rock in the road.

Her friend Holcomb says he doesn't ride bikes now. Neither does Ueng.

Now she runs, and has completed two 5Ks in the past two months. She also has learned that she's not invincible. "I don't need that anymore," she says. "I won't take risks that will endanger my life."

Friends and clients say the accident was in some ways a gift — for her and them. More than one says it has made them realize how precious life is and that they can't leave business to chance. They're taking out insurance, making contingency plans.

As for Ueng, they say she now seems happier, more comfortable in her own skin. She still works hard, but keeps work in perspective. She won't shortchange her personal life.

Now she's planning another trip. This time with her son. They're going to China to visit relatives Nicholas has never met. There will be very little business. She's going to practice her Chinese.

That was something else the accident gave her: She had forgotten most of the Mandarin Chinese she knew as a little girl. After the head trauma, she realized she was fluent again.

Staff writer Vicki Lee Parker can be reached at 829-4898 or vparker@newsobserver.com.