

NO CHOICE BUT FORWARD

After a life-threatening brain aneurysm,
Caroline McCaffrey '28 rebuilt her
strength — one step and one mile at a time

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photography by EMILY LAMPARTER

HALF A MILE into an easy Sunday evening run, the kind she had done countless times before, **Caroline McCaffrey '28** felt a sudden, unsettling tightness in her neck — enough to stop her midstride.

Then the pain hit.

Pressure flooded her skull. Her vision blurred. She stumbled to a curb, nauseated and disoriented. Her mother, a former FBI employee who happened to be riding her bike alongside McCaffrey, stayed calm.

It was Father's Day — June 15, 2025. McCaffrey was 18 years old, fresh off her first year at Bucknell, when a blood vessel in her brain ruptured.

"It felt like something was squeezing my head, like it was in a vice," McCaffrey says. "My neck was so tight I couldn't turn it. That's what concerned me."

As a student-athlete at Bucknell, McCaffrey competed on the Bison



cross-country and track & field teams. A disciplined runner, she was used to logging long miles and back-to-back training days — a routine built on endurance and discipline.

At Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center near her home in Ellicott City, Md., an emergency room doctor initially diagnosed a migraine. Her mother pushed back. When the shift changed, a second doctor ordered a CT scan.

It revealed bleeding in the brain.

What followed was a 20-day medical gauntlet across three hospitals. At The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, doctors placed an emergency drain through her skull to relieve pressure. Then she was transferred to the University of Maryland Medical Center, where surgeons threaded a catheter from her thigh to her brain and packed the ruptured aneurysm with tiny coils. They also discovered a second, unruptured aneurysm, which they later clipped in open brain surgery on July 3.

Doctors later told McCaffrey she had likely lived with the aneurysms for years — possibly since birth. While the rise in blood pressure during her run may have triggered the rupture, they said it would have happened eventually. A family history of aneurysms also suggested a genetic component.

When McCaffrey finally woke in the neuro intensive care unit, half her head shaved, one question rose above all others: “Can I still walk?”

She could, although that answer was far from guaranteed. Roughly half of ruptured brain aneurysm patients never reach the hospital. Among those who do, many face lasting physical or cognitive challenges. McCaffrey had none.



THE LONG ROAD BACK

During long walks down the ICU hallway, McCaffrey passed glass-walled rooms where patients lay motionless, some unlikely to recover. But in the hospital’s Healing Garden, an indoor courtyard, small birds darted across her field of view, drawing a tired smile to her face. Her Bucknell roommate and teammate **Katie Moncavage ’28**, one of many friends who visited McCaffrey in the hospital, noticed.

“It was amazing to see her take in the little joys in life even during such a traumatic situation,” Moncavage says. “She is such an inspiration.”



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Biology major Caroline McCaffrey '28 aspires to become a certified registered nurse anesthetist, a path shaped by her own medical experience.

When assistant cross-country coach Rob Guissanie and head coach Kevin Donner drove from Lewisburg to Baltimore, they expected a brief visit. They stayed more than 90 minutes.

“Aside from her head being shaved and having a huge scar from surgery, she was Caroline — all smiles, eyes bright and very talkative,” Guissanie says. “If you had just audio of the conversation, you’d never know we were in the hospital.”

Recovery at home came slowly but steadily. At first, McCaffrey took short walks with her father — from her front stoop to the end of the street — gradually

building to six miles by early August. Even after she was cleared to run in September, uncertainty lingered. “I was definitely scared to run again,” she says.

She eased back in cautiously — starting with intervals as short as 30 seconds of running followed by 30 seconds of walking. Throughout, her neurosurgeon and neurology team emphasized a key point: Running had not caused the rupture.

Neuro physical therapy, including monitored stress tests and blood pressure tracking during walking and biking, guided her progression and rebuilt her confidence.

That fall, she remained at home to stay close to her care team. She understood it was the right decision, but she longed to be on campus. “I just wanted to be back at Bucknell,” she says.

While she was still in the hospital, McCaffrey’s brother discovered We Run With You, an organization that supports athletes recovering from brain injuries. Its founder had survived a ruptured aneurysm herself and offered something different from McCaffrey’s doctors: lived experience.

Bucknell cross-country coaches Rob Guissanie and Kevin Donner (L-R) visited Caroline McCaffrey '28 during her hospital recovery.



Following emergency brain surgery, McCaffrey had to relearn how to walk before gradually returning to running.



Tori Chace '26 and Katie Moncavage '28 spent time with McCaffrey (L-R) in the ICU.



"Your doctors can answer all the medical questions," McCaffrey says, "but at the end of the day, they've never been in that position."

The organization invited her to run the Rothman Orthopaedics 8K — a 4.97-mile race held during Philadelphia Marathon Weekend in November — as part of their charity team. She signed up and set a \$1,000 fundraising goal.

It didn't stay there long.

Donations climbed past \$5,000. Then \$10,000. Back in Lewisburg, Moncavage designed "Team Caroline" T-shirts featuring the phrase "Give Yourself a Reason," a lyric by singer-songwriter Noah Kahan that McCaffrey had tattooed on her left arm. On race day, teammates pulled them on and lined up beside McCaffrey.

McCaffrey ran an 8K race with Bucknell teammates after raising nearly \$13,000 for a brain-injury organization.



The transition was not seamless. She needed to rebuild stamina; long days left her fatigued. The adjustment, she says, was as much emotional as physical as she needed to work to be in a routine that once felt automatic.

"Team Caroline" in action: Bison cross-country teammates took to the streets of Philadelphia in solidarity with McCaffrey (center).



REDEFINING STRONG

At a post-race evening reception, hosted by We Run With You, McCaffrey was honored as the organization's top individual fundraiser, raising nearly \$13,000. McCaffrey was invited to address those attending the event. She spoke about a word she had heard constantly during her recovery: "strong." Friends used it to describe her in texts, cards and calls.

"I did not feel strong lying in a hospital bed for days on end when just a week ago I had been cranking out 10-mile runs," she told the crowd. "When your life is unwillingly turned upside down, you have no choice but to be strong."

She returned to Bucknell in January for the spring 2026 semester. Back on campus, McCaffrey eased into student life again — returning to biology labs, catching up with professors and reconnecting with teammates who had followed her recovery from afar. Despite missing a semester, she remains on track to graduate with her class, helped in part by credits earned before arriving at Bucknell.

Her academic path has also shifted. Once on a pre-med track with plans to become a neurologist, McCaffrey changed direction after her time in the ICU. While she credits the surgeons with saving her life and guiding her recovery, she formed a deeper bond with the nurses — those who talked her through what was happening, sat with her at 2 a.m. and treated her like a person, not just a patient.

"I want to go into nursing because of the nurses," she says. "They made the most personal and lasting impact."

Now on a pre-nursing track, she plans to earn a master's degree in nursing and eventually become a certified registered nurse anesthetist. She has already shadowed her own neurosurgeon, observing the procedure that saved her life.

This November, McCaffrey will return to Philadelphia — this time for the half-marathon (13.1 miles). Her brother will

join her. So will high school friends who have never raced before. And once again, her Bucknell teammates will line up beside her.

McCaffrey hopes to rejoin the Bison cross-country team by the fall, though her coaches have made clear the timeline is hers to set. For now, she is running about seven miles at a time as she rebuilds her strength.

"It's just such a perspective check," she says. "Having the chance to be running and back at Bucknell is a blessing."

Now, each run is less about pace than possibility. Step by step, she is finding her way back. ■