



Jacqui's face was terribly burnt



Jacqui Saburido, 20, was enjoying a night out with friends when a drink-driver horrifically changed her life forever...

# 'I looked at my burnt f



The horrific wreckage in which two young women tragically died



Reggie Stephy, the 20-year-old drink-driver who caused the accident



Jacqui (second left) and her friends hours before the accident. Laura Guerrero (far right) and another girl Natalie were both killed

**W**AVING GOODBYE TO HER PARTY friends, Jacqui Saburido climbed into the waiting car with a smile on her face.

She'd only recently moved from Caracas in Venezuela to Austin, Texas, to study English. And she was glad she'd persuaded her best friend Johanna Gil to accompany her on her first big night out in her new home city.

Lost in excited chatter as they drove off, Jacqui, Johanna, their friends Natalia Chpytychak Bennett, Laura Guerrero and Laura's boyfriend Johan Daal, barely registered the impact of the oncoming car.

In that terrifying split-second, twisting metal and splintering glass showered the vehicle as its frame ripped open.

With her legs trapped beneath the buckled dashboard as the engine exploded, Jacqui was still conscious as she became engulfed in heat and flames.

#### Drunk driver

It was 19 September 1999. As paramedics raced to the scene, they held little hope for any survivors.

Tragically, both Natalia and Laura died at the scene, the victims of Reggie Stephey, the 20-year-old drink-driver who had ploughed head-on into their car. Incredibly, Johanna managed to escape with dislocated bones, a fractured nose and two lost teeth while Johan suffered just torn tendons in his knee and hand.

operations and skin grafts, Jacqui finally felt ready to look at herself for the first time.

Steeling herself, she glanced at two recent photographs of herself at home in Caracas and another at university in Texas.

But the vision in the bathroom mirror bore no relation to the stunning young woman she left behind that fateful night. Instead red, scarred skin stretched tightly across what had once been her face.

"I studied my skin inch by inch and made myself touch it to make it real," she recalls.

"Then I couldn't help myself - I cried and cried for hours. But I had to find a way to carry on."

Jacqui's father, Amadeo, 50, gave up his air conditioning business in Caracas to care for her full time. Her mum, Rosalia, separated from Jacqui's father, assisted. Amadeo fed Jacqui, cleaned and massaged her, applying creams to her face. At night he woke up every two hours to administer eye drops.

#### Desire for independence

Despite being in the 24-hour care of her father, Jacqui's desire for independence became her strength. In time, she learnt to wash herself and also read again, thanks to cornea transplants in both eyes. Still missing her left eyelid, she learnt to apply drops every 15 minutes. And she even set herself the goal of getting behind the wheel

ex-boyfriend Marcus fainted when he saw me."

But many friends stuck by her. "Their true love helped us recover," she says.

Marcus married soon after, but rather than dwell on the past, Jacqui looked forward to her own romantic future.

"I struck up a new friendship with a man in Mexico," she says. "He sent me a teddy and lovely letter late last year after seeing my website. We began emailing and speaking on the phone. He has been incredibly supportive."

The pair are planning to meet this summer. "It's daunting to think of getting involved with someone new," says Jacqui. "But I would love to get married and have children and a career one day."

But some parts of her life still remain steeped in loss. Once inseparable, she and Johanna have spoken only five times since the accident. "She became very depressed," says Jacqui.

Since the crash, Jacqui and her father have moved to Kentucky, to be near a good plastic surgeon. After 50 operations, she's now considering having final drastic surgery.

"I've been thinking of having a face transplant so that it's easier for me to live in this society," she says. "I do want to be accepted and looking 'normal' will help."

Incredibly, Jacqui has forgiven the man who caused her such horrific injuries.

Stephey is currently serving a seven-year jail

# ce and cried for hours'

But Jacqui experienced appalling injuries and rescuers thought she was a charred corpse. Agonising third-degree burns covered 60 per cent of her skin. The only parts left untouched were her buttocks, knees and the back of her neck. Her left arm was also broken and her left leg fractured.

Air-lifted to Texas University Medical Center's specialist burns unit by helicopter, staff there didn't expect Jacqui to survive. Her nose, ears, lips and eyelids all dropped off when nurses tried to clean her. Half blind, completely bald and barely able to walk, her fingers eventually turned black and had to be amputated.

But the brave student defied all odds. In March 2000, after six months of complex

of a car one day and overcoming her fears.

But for every positive day, there was a lonely, dark one. In December 2000, wracked with depression, Jacqui went home to Caracas to see her friends and family.

"I tried to help my friends cope with the shock of seeing me," she says. "I wore a wig, prosthetic ears and nose and a Santa hat. They didn't recognise me."

"But eventually I decided they should see the real me, so I hummed some striptease music and slowly took off my wig and prosthetic features. My best friend Marvin burst into tears when she saw me. Some were sick. But it wasn't their fault."

She adds: "Some friends never came to see me because they couldn't bear it. My

sentence after being found guilty of causing the deaths of Laura and Natalie through drink-driving. He was also fined £5,000.

She says: "I feel sorry for Reggie. His life has been ruined too. When I met him during the trial, I told him I forgave him."

As a result, Jacqui now seeks to educate others on the dangers of drink-driving. Both she and Stephey have already been involved in a hard-hitting TV campaign in the US.

"If I have to be seen on TV with no ears, no nose, no eyebrows and no hair," she says, "I'll do it a thousand times, if it will help one person make a wise decision." ■

By Rachel Dobson

For further information about Jacqui and her campaign, see [www.helpjacqui.com](http://www.helpjacqui.com)