

# “If you stay positive, you can make it through anything!”

When a tragic accident left 16-year-old Kilee Brookbank severely burned, she had to dig deep to find strength to pull through. And with love and determination, she did just that . . .

Walking into her Georgetown, Ohio, house, 16-year-old Kilee Brookbank tossed her backpack on the floor. With her mom at work, it was just her after school with her two Chihuahua-Yorkshire terrier pups, Doogie and Digger.

“Hey, guys!” she cooed, scratching their fuzzy heads.

Just then, Kilee noticed an odd smell in the air. So, reaching for a cinnamon-mocha scented candle to try to mask the scent, she flicked a lighter and . . .

**BOOM!**  
A flash of searing heat threw Kilee to the ground, knocking her unconscious as her body became engulfed in flames.

Kilee awoke to Digger frantically barking at her as if to say, “Wake up! We have to get out of here!”

Stunned and disoriented, there was only one thought screaming in her mind: *Run!*

## “Stay positive!”

Stumbling into her backyard, Kilee—likely in too much shock to feel the pain of her injuries—screamed, “Please help me!”

Her neighbors, who had heard the blast and called 911, doused Kilee with water until paramedics arrived and rushed her to Shriners’ Hospital in Cincinnati.

Later, they would learn that the blast was likely caused by a propane gas leak. Their house, and everything inside, was reduced to ashes, gone forever.

But as Kilee’s mom, Lori, took one look at her daughter’s singed hair and raw wounds, all she could think was: My baby!

“The hardest part was I couldn’t hug her. I couldn’t even hold her hand,” Lori recalls.

Doctors determined that Kilee had second and third-degree burns over 45% of her body. Her hands were affected most. She would survive, but the road to healing would be long and painful.

Kilee began a series of grueling surgeries to remove damaged tissue and place skin grafts on her burns. Because of the high risk of infection, nurses had to vigorously scrub her open wounds.

Kilee had always considered herself a strong girl. But the pain—one bath lasted *six hours*—was excruciating, her swollen skin raw and throbbing.

When Kilee lifted a mirror to her face for the first time since the accident, she saw that her long chestnut hair was gone. And though they wouldn’t be disfiguring, her face was speckled with red burns.

“If anybody can do this, it’s you,” Lori whispered to her.

## Overcoming

It wasn’t easy, but “Smiley Kilee,” as her dad had always called her, knew she would have to somehow try to maintain a positive outlook if she ever wanted to get back to a “normal” life.

So even though it hurt, she’d laugh when she and her dad

watched silly reality shows together.

After 38 days in the hospital, Kilee went home—to a rental house.

Taking a shower was now a three-hour process, as she had to carefully unwrap the special compression garments protecting her skin, then meticulously clean her wounds.

The fingers that used to nimbly text friends now struggled to hold a fork. Brushing her teeth or even pulling on yoga pants took 10 times as long as it once had.

“It was like my brain knew what to do, but physically I just couldn’t do it,” Kilee says.

Still, whenever Kilee found herself getting frustrated, she’d vent to her friends or her cousin, who often stopped by after school and Kilee’s physical therapy. And just two months after the accident, Kilee herself went back to school.

What will the other kids think? Will they treat me differently than before? Kilee worried.

But her fears washed away when she saw a *Welcome back, Kilee!* banner hanging in the hallway.

“We knew you’d be back!” classmates cheered. For the first time in a long time, Kilee felt *normal*.

In the weeks that followed, Kilee began to regain more dexterity in her hands, making taking notes in class easier. And just a month



“I’m so grateful to have a second chance at life!” says Kilee. Inset with Digger, and below at a physical therapy session as she healed.



after completing physical therapy—ahead of schedule!—she rejoined her school’s soccer team!

Today, a year and a half after the fire, Kilee’s body still bears scars that remind her of the struggle she faced. But now, she embraces them as reminders of her strength. She and Lori have even written *Beautiful Scars*, a book sharing her journey. And they’ve also founded the Kilee Gives Back Foundation ([KileeGivesBack.org](http://KileeGivesBack.org)), a nonprofit to help other families in times of crisis.

“It’s so important not to focus on the negative,” Kilee says. “No matter what happens, if you stay positive and try your best, you can make it through anything!”

—Rachel Cosma

“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.”

WINSTON CHURCHILL

## Protect your home from a gas leak! Here’s what you need to know:



✔ **Be alert for these signs!** Both propane gas and natural gas have an odor that’s akin to rotten eggs. Other signs: discolored wilted plants near the gas line, a hissing sound or bubbling in standing water.

✔ **If you smell gas . . .** check to see if a pilot light is out on the stove or the furnace. If not, leave the house and call 911 from a safe distance. Avoid using anything in the house that creates a spark, such as phones or lights.

✔ **Protect your home!** Two simple things you can do: Get a gas leak detector (about \$18, [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)) and change the air filter in your furnace every month to prevent clogged lines.

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