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From the Los Angeles Times

Lilly Tartikoff: from tragedy to triumph

Wealth and fame couldn't save her from heartache. But as the former ballerina knows, you've got to pick yourself up and dance on.

By Robin Abcarian

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On a bright afternoon after a lot of rain, Calla Tartikoff is beginning a physical therapy session at a small gym on Melrose Avenue. Two women—both intensely focused on Calla—lean over her on a Pilates bed, one making sure her hips are in the right place, the other pushing her feet. Calla's shadow, Brigitte Poirier, is sitting nearby on a big exercise ball, bouncing slightly. Calla is having trouble paying attention. First, her mother, Lilly Tartikoff, and I are sitting right next to her, talking about her. Second, actor Eric McCormack of "Will & Grace" has just walked past and the women are atwitter. Lilly jumps up and disappears.

FOR THE RECORD:

Lilly Tartikoff: West magazine's March 25 article on Lilly Tartikoff and her efforts to recover from family tragedies said she had funneled \$30 million to \$35 million to the Revlon/UCLA Breast Center. The money was raised for the Revlon/UCLA Women's Cancer Research Program. —

"You would not believe what happened one day," Calla tells me, and begins to recount a recent exchange she had with McCormack at the gym. "I said to him, 'How are you doing?' And he said, 'Better, now that I've seen you.'"

A few minutes later, Lilly returns with the actor in tow. "Calla? I'd like you to meet my friend Eric."

"We were just talking about you!" says Calla.

"You were not!" says McCormack, his voice rising just like Will's. "It's nice to meet you, sweetie."

"Again, you mean," says Calla. "I tried to hit on you once."

"You didn't try hard enough," he jokes.

Calla's entourage hovers: Her mother, who has walked to the gym from her nearby mansion; her mother's assistant, Laurie Hawkins, who once worked for Christopher and Dana Reeve; trainer Audrey Millstein; gym owner Juliet Kaska; and Poirier, one of two young women who take turns "shadowing" Calla to make sure she is safe.

Not exactly the entourage of your average 24 year old. That Calla is alive at all, let alone with an entourage, is something of a miracle. From the moment she was nearly killed in a car crash with her father 16 years ago, she has been surrounded by people looking after her, most notably her mother, whose refusal to accept that her daughter would never walk, talk or see again has led, improbably, to Calla's recovery and this moment in the gym.

"So, tell me about your mom," I ask, teasing Lilly, who has always been candid about her fierce need for control.

"She's a drill sergeant," says Calla, whose monotone voice, a result of her injuries, is at odds with her conversational wit.

"That doesn't hurt my feelings," Lilly interrupts. "It makes me feel like, mission accomplished!"

Last October, a review in The Times' Food section praised a modest new lunch spot near the Westside Pavilion in West Los Angeles. The piece mentioned that the owners of the Colony Caf— were Lilly and Calla Tartikoff.

For anyone familiar with the Tartikoffs' story, this was startling news. Calla's late father, Brandon Tartikoff, was the wunderkind NBC programmer who conceived or championed "The Cosby Show," "The Golden Girls," "Miami Vice," "Cheers" and "Seinfeld" and put NBC on top of the TV heap for most of the '80s. The Tartikoffs were a golden couple—Lilly, charming and relentless and armed with Brandon's legendary Rolodex, created the Fire & Ice Ball with Revlon's Ronald Perelman, squeezing money from everyone she could, never taking no for an answer. It was a glittering annual party (and damn fine PR for Revlon) that raised millions of dollars for cancer research. In 1993, she co-founded the Revlon Run/Walk for Women. Her motivation was not just to help find a cure for a disease, but to support the work of one doctor in particular, Dennis Slamon of UCLA, a breast cancer researcher who had successfully treated Brandon's first recurrence of Hodgkin's disease. Over the years, Slamon estimates, Tartikoff has funneled \$30 million to \$35 million to the Revlon/UCLA Women's Breast Center. That money, unfettered by government rules, sped the development of the drug Herceptin, which has saved thousands of women's lives.

Then came the 1991 car accident and, in 1997, Brandon's death from cancer. Periodically, Lilly would emerge from what seemed to be hiding to pull off another fundraiser—her last Fire & Ice Ball took place in 2000—but then she'd disappear. In those years, fixing Calla and fixing cancer were all she did.

And Calla—well, outside of the Tartikoffs' circle of friends, it was a mystery what had become of her.

"She's doing fabulous," Brandon told The Times four months after the crash. She was alive, but she wasn't what any parent would consider fabulous. "No one ever knew how severe it was," says Lilly. "No one has ever read this story. People just heard and wondered."

What people had heard was a piece of dreadful news: On New Year's Day 1991, Brandon pulled onto a highway near Lake Tahoe in his Jeep, with Calla at his side. They were hit by a speeding car, leaving Brandon with major injuries and 8-year-old Calla near death with a bleeding brain. Brandon fully recovered after eight weeks in the hospital. Calla was in a coma for six weeks.

"I remember watching Lilly for hours working with Calla when Calla was in a coma, just sitting there, incessantly exercising her limbs in bed so she wouldn't have atrophy, talking to her, reading to her, everything you can imagine and more," Slamon says.

"You can't think about Lilly without thinking about the bad cards she was dealt," he adds. "The remarkable thing about her is the way she played that hand, her single-minded devotion to making things better for the people around her. She can be tough to deal with, but the reason we have such a great program is because of her."

Calla spent six months at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles. "I worked her 14 hours a day," Lilly says. "They told me to get my house ready for a wheelchair and that she would never walk, or speak or talk. And I'd say to them, 'I danced in the New York City Ballet and my daughter's gonna walk again!' It was probably denial, but it was also the reason I got her up. I would strap her up, tape her hands and her feet to a bike and I would push it. Or I would be on my knees and she'd take a step with her right foot, and I'd move her left. Because I was trained by Balanchine, I knew it's all about repetition."

When Calla was able to talk, it became clear that her mind was intact. So was her sense of humor. "I am not kidding," says Lilly. "Someone would come in and ask 'Are you comfortable?' And she would say, 'I make a living.'"

Lilly fired physical therapists one after another. And then someone told her about Nicky Schmidt, a physical therapist who specializes in patients with neurological injuries. "He said, 'There's a woman in New Orleans who can get Calla to walk.' That's all he had to say to me.

"Nicky was more talented than Balanchine, more talented than Brandon Tartikoff; she had a gift from God. She was like an octopus, with eight arms and legs. I said to Brandon, 'I am not coming home.'"

Brandon had just taken a job as head of Paramount Studios, and Lilly offered to move Schmidt, a mother of three, to Los Angeles. "I know you will find this crass," Lilly told Schmidt, "but if you come we will buy you a house and get your husband a job as an associate producer."

Schmidt was tempted, but demurred. So Lilly moved Calla to New Orleans. After some months of commuting, Brandon stunned his colleagues by quitting Paramount—it had been a somewhat rocky tenure anyway—and joined his family in the South. "I made him sign a piece of paper that he wouldn't work until Calla was better," says Lilly. But he'd sneak out, pretending to go to lunch, and would hook up with Quincy Jones, who owned local television stations. Brandon became, as his obituary in the New Orleans Times-Picayune put it, "a beloved figure in local TV, radio and theater circles." He created programming—a pilot for a talent show ("American Idol," anyone?) and a local game show called "N.O. It Alls."

For the five years the Tartikoffs lived in Louisiana, almost no one visited. No one was invited; no one was welcome.

During that time, says NBC Sports Chairman Dick Ebersol, a close friend who had hired Brandon at NBC in 1977, "I talked to Lilly a lot, but I never went once. I don't remember anybody who went." Even Lilly's younger sister, Susie Salzberg, who acted as a go-between for friends, visited only once. "I knew when she needed me, she'd call. It wasn't a personal thing," says Salzberg, who lives in Hancock Park. "It was really hard for my mother, though. She is a European Jewish mother, an immigrant, a Holocaust survivor. And it was right after my father had passed away. But she understood."

Meanwhile, Schmidt worked with Calla two and three hours a day, five days a week. The big therapeutic goal, says Schmidt, "was to return her life to some sort of normality." When she was well enough, Calla attended a local private school, trailed by a shadow. Calla's lingering problems are similar to those suffered by someone who has had a serious stroke—the partial paralysis of one side of her body. Her walk is wobbly. And her vision is seriously compromised. "What she sees of the world is sort of scattered, and that impacts a lot of things—balance, coordination," Schmidt says.

The Tartikoffs' marriage suffered, of course. Whose wouldn't have? No charges were ever filed in connection with the accident, but there was enough blame to go around. Lilly dealt with whatever anger she felt toward her husband by refusing to dwell on it. "People said, 'Did you and Brandon do therapy?' I would look at Brandon and say, 'I can't fix you and you can't fix me.' There was no time for, you know, 'How did you feel about what just happened?' So I was probably emotionally pretty sick . . . And I don't think Brandon was ever happy again."

Brandon's death in August 1997 caught everyone by surprise. He had beaten Hodgkin's twice already, and many assumed he would beat it again. "He did lick it the third time," says Ebersol. "But his immune system was shot."

Lilly, so sure he'd recover, did not give fair warning to many of his friends, some of whom are wounded to this day, nor even to Calla, who was 14 at the time. (Lizzy, adopted while they were in Louisiana, was 2. She doesn't remember her dad, but keeps a tender photo of them together on her bedside table.)

"It was a very mismanaged time," Lilly says. "Chaotic. I wasn't worried at that time about the long-term effects on everybody. I just switched my focus to Brandon. I didn't want Calla to be around all the sickness and the sadness, and I really believed we were gonna get it all on track."

Brandon, Lilly and Lizzy had already moved back to Beverly Hills, and Brandon would undergo a stem-cell transplant at UCLA. Calla was finishing up her school year in New Orleans. Sitting on a bench next to a koi pond at her gym, Calla recites from memory something she wrote for a high school class after her father died:

The sun was shining brightly in the kitchen. We had just moved back from New Orleans after my dad had undergone chemotherapy. The dishes weren't unpacked and my nanny and I were anxiously waiting for lunch to arrive . . . all you could hear were our tiny voices talking. Door closed. Is that lunch? I don't know. Is that you, Mom? Yes, it's me. Calla, I want you to know that I will always love you and take care of you. I got up . . . and I said what's wrong? And she said, let's go upstairs. Calla, your dad has passed away. I walked aimlessly across the hallway. Calla, are you OK? Calla, are you OK? In answer, the soft click of my door. He was everywhere. He was pitching in a baseball game, he was reading a book to a peacock, we were eating ice cream cake together, he was holding me as a baby. I picked it

up and started to cry.

She says she felt numb when her father died, and later was angry at her mother for keeping her away.

"Would it have made a difference if you would have let me see him when he was sick?" Calla asks. "I'm sure it would have," says Lilly, whose eyes are moist. "But I can't change that."

Eventually, Calla enrolled in Campbell Hall, a private school in Studio City. When she graduated at 19 in June 2002, she received a standing ovation. "She danced her way to the podium," says Lilly. "They went crazy."

Two years ago, Calla asked whether she'd ever be able to hold a job. Lilly, ever the fixer, got busy.

Maybe a T-shirt shop? she thought as she drove up and down Westside streets. "But Calla doesn't really care about clothes. She's really social, she loves talking to people, and it just came down to the only situation that would be fun for her would be a little caf-."

So the Colony Caf- is a gift to Calla. "Calla can't do all the physically demanding things a restaurant requires, but she tries to work a couple of hours a day at least," says Lilly. "It's a very expensive two hours. If I could have just written her a check and that would have been meaningful, honestly, I would have saved myself so much aggravation."

Schmidt, who was in town recently to reevaluate Calla's therapy program, watched her at work. "She knows her employees and likes to greet guests, so it gives her purpose and meaning beyond her sister and friends."

The d-cor is beachy with navy-and-white striped awnings and wicker chairs, based on Lilly's house in the Malibu Colony. There may be a related product line at some point. "There are hundreds of people living in Malibu Colony," says "Spider-Man 3" producer Laura Ziskin, a close friend and Malibu neighbor of Lilly. "But only she was smart enough to brand it."

The day we met at her gym, Calla had had a good work shift, something that made her feel accomplished and, perhaps more important, independent. "I did the whole shift by myself," she says, "and if I keep on doing as well as I am in the caf-, then the rest of my life falls into place."

Since 1999, Lilly has lived in a large formal Paul Williams home in the flats of Beverly Hills. Lilly bought the home with Calla's physical therapy needs in mind. Because it's in the flats, it's an easy walk to the Beverly Hills shopping district. "I wanted to be able to bribe her to walk five blocks and then I'd reward her with a Coffee Bean," says Lilly. "With all her other issues, I would just not let her get fat!"

The backyard is laid out in perfectly straight lines—no surprises for someone with impaired vision. Lilly expanded the back of the house, adding a big Southern sitting porch and a second staircase so she wouldn't have to bump into Calla's endless procession of therapists. "I didn't want them to go away, I just didn't want to look at them all day," she says. "Therapists had opinions about what I was doing, and I was sick of their opinions. Not that I didn't appreciate what they did, but it's just not a natural way to live."

The kitchen has a wall of family snapshots and a bank of four security monitors next to the stove. Lilly is anxious about security and sometimes fixates on farfetched scenarios: Someone might kidnap her children because she is a rich widow. On the other hand, given the tragedies in her life, who's to say what fear is over the top?

She is comforted by the presence of her 24-year-old godson, Charlie Ebersol, who lives in an apartment above the garage. Charlie is an aspiring producer who moved in about two years ago after his 14-year-old brother, Teddy, was killed in a 2004 plane crash in Colorado. Charlie, who was aboard the plane, broke his back in two places but pulled his seriously injured father from the burning wreckage. He's become close to Lizzy, a talented cartoonist whose work he has encouraged. "I lost my brother, but I've gained a 12-year-old sister in Lizzy," he says.

In March 2002, nudged by the case manager Lilly had hired to oversee her treatment plan, Calla moved to an apartment in a complex that offers support to young

adults with disabilities.

"It was very hard for Lilly to let go," says Suzanne Wright, a close friend whose husband Bob recently stepped down from the top job at NBC Universal. "We kept saying, this is not about Lilly, it's about what's best for Calla."

"I was frightened," says Lilly, "but it was the best decision I could have made."

Calla will probably never have what another 24 year old would consider a normal life. "You worry," says Schmidt. "Will she have a seizure? Will she get hurt? There is always a companion around to be sort of a mother, but you have to let the bird fly the nest."

Although it is sometimes unclear exactly how she processes the world, Schmidt says, "Calla is not mentally retarded. She is very intelligent. Once she caught up, she did grade-level work. Her memory is phenomenal, and she writes beautifully. I always ask her when she's going to write her novel."

Calla has friends, and she has dated, Schmidt says. During her recent visit, Calla invited her to dinner. "She made a chicken vegetable stir fry for me," Schmidt says. "It was wonderful."

Lilly, who at 53 still has a slim dancer's build, has spacious closets filled with beautiful (and very small) cocktail dresses. (Brandon's nickname for her was "Putian," as in Lilliputian.) "I've bought out all the dresses in Beverly Hills," she says during a house tour. "Bruce likes me to wear them."

Bruce is her boyfriend, Bruce Karatz, whom she has been dating since June 2005. In the closet, she tries on a pair of low-heel Chanel pumps that she'd just ordered for a two-week trip to Asia with Karatz. He is the former chief executive of KB Home and, until he left the job in November, one of the highest-paid CEOs in the country. "I'm crazy about him," she says. "I'd never heard of him. I didn't even know what a KB Home was."

A bearish man, he reminds her somehow of the long, lean Brandon. "Bruce is not the same boyish person. He's a man. I had to meet someone who wasn't intimidated by me, and the thing with Bruce is, he doesn't let me run the show. I try, but he just laughs."

The 61-year-old Karatz, divorced last year from Food Network personality Sandra Lee, recently was in the news when federal prosecutors announced that they are investigating KB's stock-option-grant practices. Lilly is undaunted. "It's very interesting to know the man with the corporate jet and the man without the jet," she says. "With the jet is a lot of fun. It's like heroin . . . there's nothing better in life, other than making love, I don't care what anyone says."

Anyway, her friends approve. "They're great. Well suited. He is a menschy good guy," Ziskin says.

They have traveled quite a bit together, and there are photographs of the two of them around her house—she is draped over his lap on a yacht in Turkey, she is smiling next to him with the Eiffel Tower behind them. In February, they visited Vietnam, Cambodia and Hong Kong. Earlier this month, they flew to Zihuatanejo for a weekend. Over Christmas, they spent 16 days at his Sun Valley home. "It's a big life," Lilly says, sounding content.

Lilly continues to raise money for cancer research and is getting ready for the next Revlon Run/Walk. Still, the long-defunct Fire & Ice Ball was her signature event. It put her on the map as one of the foremost cancer fundraisers in the country, and it's not clear why she pulled the plug on it.

"I had lunch with Ron Perelman today, and he asked me the same question," she replies. It's simple: She was exhausted; the research she'd supported had paid off with Herceptin. But Perelman had a proposition: "I want to work together again. Let's start putting some ideas together."

A simple suggestion, really, but one that should send ripples of anxiety through Lilly Tartikoff's deep-pocketed Hollywood friends.

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