

July 2016

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AND INSPIRATION

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TBI HOPE MAGAZINE

*Serving All Impacted by
Brain Injury*

July 2016

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Welcome

Welcome to the July 2016 issue of TBI HOPE Magazine.

Brain injury can strike anyone at any time. This month we bring you a wide diversity of stories from some amazing survivors. You'll read about a young woman who sustained her TBI while still in high school. A trip to Disney left her with more than just happy memories!

We are pleased as well to share a story of true courage from a sports concussion survivor who then went on to serve in the military and now helps others impacted by concussion/brain injury.

There are many causes of brain injury in today's world, but the best treatment is prevention. As you are out and about enjoying all the fun that comes with this summer season, please be safe. If you are engaged in an activity that has some risk, wear a helmet. A little bit of common sense can save a lifetime of challenges.

We hope you come away from this month's issue with just a bit of hope and inspiration.



David A. Grant
Publisher

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"We know what we are, but know not what we may be."

~William Shakespeare



Haley's Journey

by Haley Anderson

The past two years of my life have been a rollercoaster. I sustained a Traumatic Brain Injury during my junior year of high school while on a ride in Disneyland.

After my injury, I had trouble walking and talking and had tunnel vision for nearly a year. Both my short term and long term memory were shot. I got intense motion sickness when I rode in the car for any longer than ten minutes and if I turned my head too fast, or even if I stood up too fast. I had a headache all day every day for months on end. I was extremely sensitive to light and sound and put on more than 20 pounds due to various medications and inactivity. I had nightmares every night for more than a year, and I also suffered from PTSD and post-concussive syndrome. I spent the three months following my injury curled up in a ball in my room because I was in so much pain.

During the last two years I have had over two hundred medical appointments and have been treated by more than twenty medical professionals. I was not able to return to school the year of my accident.

When I attempted to return to school the following September, I wasn't sure if I would be able to graduate with my class. Fortunately, I had been an honor's student taking college classes and I was a year ahead in both math and science before my injury. Being a year ahead in my classes and taking college courses meant that I had extra credits and only needed one class - American Government - to graduate. I had an incredible teacher who would meet with me before school, after school, and during study hall to help me study

and to review my notes. He was always positive and encouraging and he believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. With his help I completed the year in baby steps and with shortened assignments. I don't know what I would have done without him.

Starting college while recovering from a head injury was a daunting task, and my parents and doctors advised me to take it slow. However, being the stubborn, high-achieving perfectionist that I am, I wanted to jump in at full speed. We all compromised and decided that I would start the quarter with two classes (a two credit *Intro to College* class and a three credit *Career and Life Planning* class). I was in denial about how bad my condition was and had convinced myself that I would be fine.

What a slap in the face the first week was. Everything that I used to do with ease (focusing in class, taking notes, keeping up with homework, remembering facts, figures, and readings from my textbook) was impossible. Despite my challenges I've managed to do well in my classes, receiving A's and B's. The thing that I struggled with the most was the realization that everything I had been able to do was dramatically altered. Working through that realization was one of the hardest things I've had to do throughout this journey and it took some time for me to adjust and to figure out how to work around my new challenges.

Working with the disability center at school has been incredibly helpful to me. I receive accommodations in the classroom (such as priority seating in the front of the class), I take my tests in a quiet room, and I also receive double time on all my tests and quizzes. My success in school this year was due to my supportive family and friends, working with the disability center, and my stubbornness and drive to succeed.

Music is my passion. In high school I played the alto saxophone, the B flat clarinet, the bass clarinet, and various percussion instruments. I was in four bands - Pep, Jazz, Wind Ensemble, and the pit orchestra for my high school's musicals. I was first chair (the highest



position) and was set up to receive multiple music scholarships for college. After my injury I was forced to stop playing because playing caused intense headaches that would last for days afterwards. Recently I tried to play my alto sax for the first time in almost a year and happily realized that I could play a few notes without an immediate headache. I'm slowly increasing the time I spend playing and I'm up to five minutes now, which is



so amazing and is such a big deal to me. Five minutes doesn't even begin to touch the two hours I would spend practicing in high school, but it is progress, and hey, I'll take it!

I have made great progress in the past few months. I got a job, recovered from a breakup, finished my first year at community college, found new hobbies in rock climbing and hiking, returned to rowing after a three-month break, lost the twenty pounds I had put on over the last two years. I'm down to my pre-concussion weight now, yay!

I started a new medication that helps with daily fatigue which up until recently was a HUGE problem for me. I'm also planning

on picking up piano lessons again. My nightmares have subsided and I'm sleeping better at night. I've been working with a new neurologist who has been awesome and this month I'm supposed to start working with the Harborview Medical Center Neurological Rehab Program. I am so, so, SO EXCITED for that.

I'm naturally a happy, bubbly person and I lost that part of me after the injury. When I looked in the mirror I saw a shell of who I used to be. I looked like me, but I didn't recognize myself. Everything I held dear to me—my schooling, my music, even my relationships—had been altered and I didn't know who I was. I just felt stale and bored inside and smiling and being happy and showing emotion took so much effort that it exhausted me.

As these changes have occurred I'm noticing that I'm starting to recognize the girl in the mirror again. I smile all the time and laughing is effortless. I sing in the car and laugh at

bad puns and stupid jokes. The twinkle in my eyes returned. My fiery determination and happy personality came back. I feel like I can take on the world and I'm just HAPPY.

I feel really, truly optimistic for the future and what it holds for me. Right now my plan is to finish my Associate's Degree at community college and then transfer to WSU to study Neuroscience. After I earn my degree I'd like to transfer to UW for med school to study be a Pediatric Neuropsychologist.

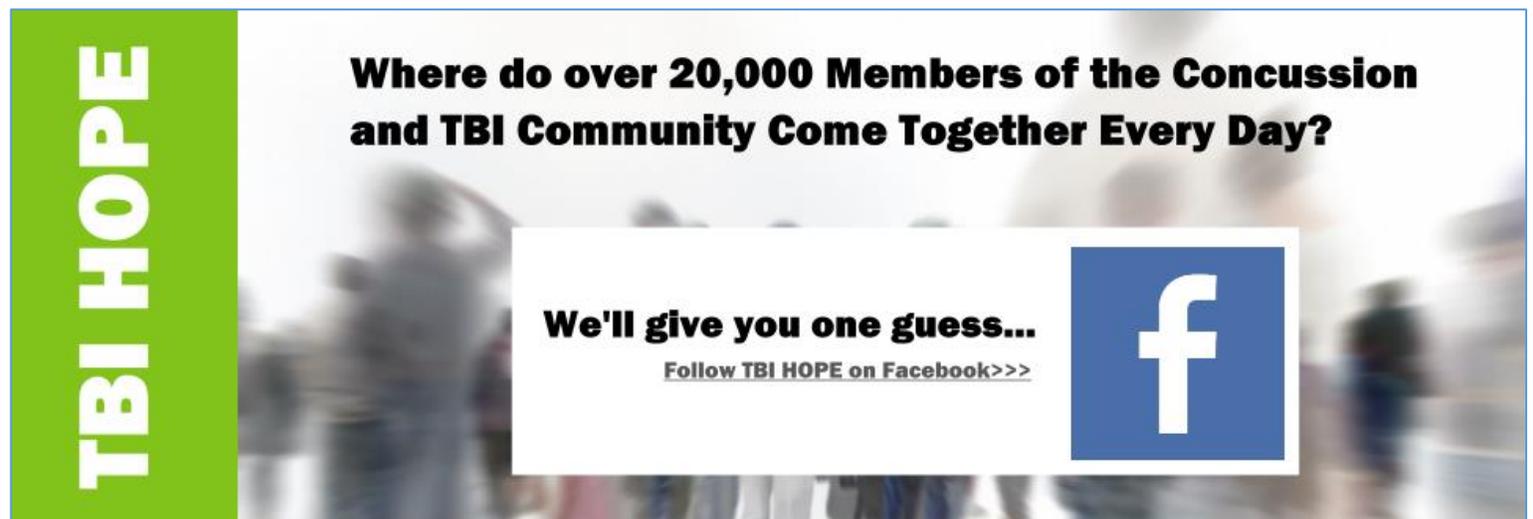
For the first time since my concussion I feel like ME.

Others have noticed the changes within me as well. As my Dad put it, "I can see my Haley again."

Meet Haley Anderson

Haley Anderson is a 19 year old college sophomore from Seattle, Washington. She's two years out from her TBI and has handled every obstacle it has thrown at her with grace.

Haley always has a smile on her face and her happy personality is infectious. She loves living in the Pacific Northwest and enjoys hiking, rock climbing, rowing, and camping.



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The Emotional Roller Coaster Ride

by Emily Rose Amner

Calm down. Get a grip. Relax. These are easy things to say, but they are not easy principles to master.

Before my brain injury I was a pretty easy person to get along with. My personality wasn't dramatic. I wasn't over-sensitive. Fighting occurred, but not too often. Heck, I only remember being wholeheartedly irate once when a person littered on the street right in front of me.

Immediately after my brain injury however, my world was turned upside down. I wasn't a new person, but all of my emotions were new. I hadn't changed on purpose, but I had changed, and at first it seemed that I hadn't changed for the better. To put it simply, I seemed to turn from a quiet desert into a raging tornado. I transformed immediately from a still and steady surface into a wild and violent storm. I was down-right angry.

Of course, not all individuals are angry after brain injury. Some don't experience this circumstance at all. Nevertheless, most individuals do ride on an emotional roller coaster after brain injury. They are then stuck learning to cope with one primary emotional hurdle. Sometimes this is depression. Often it is guilt. For many it is fear. Yet, for me, the primary obstacle I faced was learning to manage anger.

Anger was ugly. During recovery anger seemed to be the Hulk of all my emotions. The tongue lashed out irrationally. My words hurt others. It seemed as if I had lost any sense of a social filter, and anger was apparently the most common expression I needed to filter out most.

Yet, my life didn't run in this way only some of the time. It was this way nearly ALL the time. The most peace at my house seemed to be in the late night hours when the rest of the world was asleep.

My feelings would come in tsunami-like waves, attempting to destroy all that stood. Anger felt uncontrollable. Nothing could appropriately showcase my discontent: no screaming, pounding, or crying could do it justice. When the emotional storm had left then, I was left with a calm and settled disparity from its hazardous journey. Feelings were hurt. Any hope was smothered. Joy was no longer a foreseeable reality.

Yet, the emotional waves did pass through, and when they were gone I was only then left to ask myself, "Where did that come from? Did I gain anything from becoming angry?" I was trying to uncover the source of my emotional trigger to prevent the havoc it seemed to cause.



I soon found that anger in my life mostly arose when an expectation of mine was not met. I expected the world around me to behave appropriately, and when it didn't, I became furious. I constantly had the assumption that people would act in a suitable fashion, whether it be acting friendly or unselfishly. Yet, I was continually disappointed. People don't regularly act in a satisfactory way. In fact, people regularly act the opposite. Individuals are regularly selfish and unfriendly. They are commonly self-seeking and concerned over their own matters. The world, to put it simply, could not live up to my expectations. My friends could not reach the level of my standards. My family couldn't meet my expectations. Even my husband couldn't get the order right. Why? Because people aren't perfect.

Learning to control my fuming rage was one of the most difficult obstacles that I had to overcome during the years of recovery. Yet, this wasn't hard because anger itself was a unique feeling or attitude. Keeping composure instead of bursting with outrage was difficult, rather, because the act of allowing my feelings to rule my life was very easy. Allowing myself to be "explosive" was much easier than pinpointing the emotional trigger and then learning to cope with it.

In short, it was easy to be angry. Yet, it was difficult to respect a person and be kind - even when they were rude themselves. The degree of effort it takes to do something worthwhile will always be larger than the energy one spends in doing something hurtful.

Learning to cope with anger was just one obstacle that came with my personal brain injury. Yet, once I realized that acting with my emotions wasn't accomplishing anything good, I decided to take a step back and find a different approach to manage these feelings.

Instead of erupting with displeasure, I learned to separate myself in a different room. Instead of lashing out with wrath, I began holding my hand over my mouth for 15-20 minutes at a time. I wasn't preventing my temper from taking place, but I was preventing my temper from hurting others.

Learning to cope with the emotional roller coaster ride after brain injury takes practice. It takes time. You feel up one minute and down the next. Often I wonder when the ride will end. In the end, however, although a person can't prevent getting on the roller coaster ride in the first place, we can all learn to better manage and cope with the ups and downs that remain along the remainder of our journeys.

Meet Emily Rose Amner

Emily Rose Amner is a student, author, wife, and traumatic brain injury survivor. In September 2013, she was in a head on car collision that left her with two broken ligaments and a Traumatic Brain Injury. She has created a blog site at MyBruisedBrain.com to share her story. Emily is currently working towards her Bachelor's Degree at Washington State University Vancouver and hopes to become a medical doctor.



My Rebirth Process

by Natalie Griffith



December 25, 2009 was my accident and the start of my rebirth process. I was married, but three months separated at that time and shared custody of my children until the divorce was final. The evening of my accident I was driving by myself and hit no one. I had a 38% chance of living and spent time in two different hospitals for four months. When it was time to leave the hospital, my mother said I would be living with her and my dad; my ‘husband’ didn’t want my young girls to be around their mother with a traumatic brain injury.

I lived with my parents from March 2010 until November of 2013, when I moved in with a roommate. My sole source of income was SSI until February of 2016, when I decided I wanted to try to work again. I’d had five jobs since my accident and thought that working in hospitality, like a restaurant or hotel, would be great for me since I love helping people. I applied for a job at a hotel only twelve minutes away from home and interviewed for the position the very next day. During the interview, I briefly described how I was injured and that prevented me from working for almost four years. The interviewer seemed intrigued but just interviewed me. At the end of the interview, she introduced me to the general manager and we talked. At the end of the conversation, he said “You have a great smile and great personality perfect for the front desk!”

The hotel was still being built and under construction when I was hired, and I spent the first month training on a computer. I learned the tasks I’d need to do while at the front

desk which was a bit nerve-wracking because of my memory loss. I had six to eight hours of computer training four days a week - full time! WOW! My mom and my ex-husband took turns driving my children to and from school so I could give the hotel, Homewood Suites by Hilton, what I needed to become their Front Desk Agent!

Training on the computer was a challenge as I took notes and asked the Spirit to help me remember. It was very draining on my brain, but I managed to get through it. The hotel opened February 24, 2016, and I was a Front Desk Agent greeting the new guests and trying so hard to remember which buttons to click. I struggled, although everyone struggles when we are doing something new! We weren't too busy yet which helped. I looked at my notes and practiced on the computer to help me remember when I got home. I struggled remembering the words that went with the pictures of the icons on the computer, but my general manager and very young office manager were very understanding and relaxed. I was a bit harder on myself than I should have been.

About two weeks after opening, I spoke with my office manager about the difficulties I was having. I suggested I could help with Food and Beverage because I had some waitressing experience and I started in that department in March of 2016. Every person that stayed at the hotel was offered free complimentary breakfast and they could choose and collect their own foods on a plate and seat themselves.

I had a bit of a challenge because much of the staff, including the housekeepers and cook, spoke Spanish (I didn't), but the grace of God was with me and helped me. Guests were filling out survey cards about their stay at the hotel and the people that made it superb and MANY talked about how I was the highlight to their mornings. The comments said that seeing me all smiles at 6 am was so great and helped them to wake up for the day! In June of 2016, a card was filled out by a guest which read: "Natalie is very, very, kind to everyone. Congratulations to the hotel for keeping her with you."

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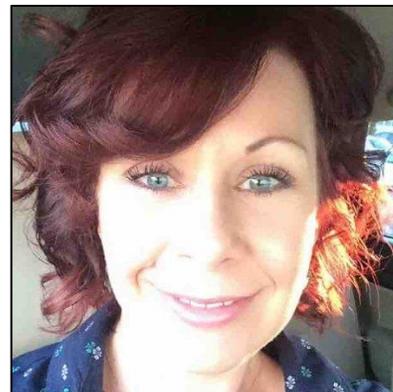
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I'm still trying to find a good home - one that is good for me and my daughters when they visit. I have been slowly getting my life together and doing what I can to be a better mom. I will continue to prosper and my kids can look back and be proud of their momma – someone who never gave up, and kept pushing and fighting! I will keep going, doing what I'm doing because I know that many are touched by my spirit, my smile, my personality, and my demeanor. I have no idea what is in store in my future, but I do know that God has me and I am doing an amazing job in my life right now.

Meet Natalie Griffith

Natalie is a mother of four and passionate brain injury advocate. A traumatic brain injury survivor since 2009, Natalie has a deep appreciation for life today – a direct result of her life-changing experiences. Natalie has been working in the hospitality industry since early 2016 and is looking forward to a bright and promising future.



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In the Dark about Sports Concussions

by Ted Stachulski

Thirty years ago, my teammates and coaches were upset at me and confused as to why I just stopped playing high school tackle football. I had no idea how to tell them the truth and rumors ran rampant.

No, it wasn't because I couldn't get a ride to and from practices or games.

No, it wasn't because I just woke up one morning with a plan to ruin all of my relationships and make myself an outcast.

No, it wasn't that I wanted to devote all of my time to becoming an alcoholic and a drug addict.

No, it wasn't because I wanted to end my athletic career on the lowest note possible after having devoted so much time and effort winning many ribbons, trophies, and championships.

I'd racked up 13 concussions from age four through 16 and got most of them while playing sports. Football and soccer were the major contributors. When I was young, I went to the hospital after my first few concussions, but as I got older I began hiding them so I could keep playing in games. I stopped playing soccer in middle school because of concussions. I should've stopped playing football for the same reason after

winning the 1983 New Hampshire Pop Warner Championship Game, but I kept on playing in high school.

I didn't know how to tell anyone I had a concussion because I was brainwashed into believing that concussions didn't harm the brain and all I needed to do was suck them up like visible physical injuries. I was learning the hard way that wasn't true because after every new concussion, my symptoms were worse and it took longer to recover. I was also learning that concussions had a negative impact on my athletic ability, academics, and relationships. I was losing the "real me" and I didn't like who I was becoming. Neither did anyone else.



I was hurt mentally and physically from a concussion I got during a high school football practice. I should've told my coaches, trainer, teammates, and mother about the concussion, but I kept it to myself like I had done so many times before. To make matters worse, just days after receiving this concussion, I took to the field to play in the game. It turned out to be one of the worst decisions I've ever made in my lifetime because I injured my brain even more while making a tackle on the opening kickoff!

I was used to playing injured and thought I would always be tough enough to pay the price when the time came. No one should ever be so **in the dark** about **concussions** that they feel they can never give up or stop playing!

I lost a lot of friends and was ridiculed in the high school halls for abandoning the team. I had become accustomed to being called an Athlete, Offensive Guard, Defensive Tackle, Linebacker, First Baseman, Pitcher, Hurdler, Relay Racer, Sprinter, Defenseman, Forward, Captain, Co-Captain, All-Star, Varsity and Champion. For the first time ever I was being called a quitter and even the people calling me that said it in a way that they couldn't believe the word was rolling off of their tongues. They were angry at me and I wasn't providing them with an explanation. I guess it was better to be called a quitter than a pussy.

Suffering from Post Concussion Syndrome and having no help with my academics, all of my grades dropped to F's and I dropped out of high school half way through my junior year. Also, I was engaging in risky behavior that was hurting me and a lot of other people. Family and friends tried to help me, but I was so depressed I just wanted to end my life. An uncle found me sitting on my bed all alone in the dark with a loaded shotgun

held to my head. I am alive today because of him.



I was sent to the mental ward of the hospital where I had been treated many times for sports injuries such as stitches to the head, broken fingers, concussions, etc. This time, like the times before, they didn't want to talk about concussions and they drugged my mind into oblivion. I spent a month in a drugged induced fog.

They released me back into the world in the worst physical and mental condition I had ever been in and just in time for football double sessions.

Even after all of that, I showed up for high school football practice for the 1986 season like an alcoholic looking for another drink or a drug addict looking for another fix. The new head coach looked at me and made me a running back. I injured my knee during a practice and didn't play in any games that year. Lucky for me, it gave me time for my brain to begin to heal and focus on retaking my junior year of high school.

Even though my sports concussion experience was 30 years ago, athletes are still following in my footsteps due to the same stigma and stubbornness I had in which I failed to realize that the brain isn't that tough and it can't "suck up" the damage from repeated blows and concussions.

You Might Be Tough, But Your Brain Isn't!

People feel the risk of injury outweighs the gain of winning a starting position on a team, a game or even a championship. Well, that's not true when it comes to your brain and it's great to see many athletes are finally speaking out about their falls from grace because of concussions.

Athletes, parents, and coaches need to realize that brains are needed for other important things throughout a person's lifetime. That there are short term and long term consequences as a result of repeatedly bashing a brain into the jagged interior of a skull or forcing it to shear while the body dishes out and receives punishing blows over and over and over again during practices and games.

Along the way, many players lose themselves like I did. They can't stand the person they've become and some resort to committing suicide. It wasn't easy finding hope and I had to dig deeper than I ever had to before in my lifetime to find it. I just had to hold on for dear life not knowing what was to come next.

In order to have enough credits to graduate high school, I took on a full schedule of classes during the day and some at night. During that time I developed meaningful relationships with others that didn't solely revolve around sports. I became one of the first high school Peer Outreach Counselors in the State of New Hampshire and told my story to children in elementary schools. I went to the prom and had a great time.

In June of 1988, I received my high school diploma while I was attending Marine Corps boot camp. During my military career, I was meritoriously promoted and honorably served our country. I got married, raised a family and had meaningful employment as an Electronics Technician and a CDL Driver.

I created the Veterans Traumatic Brain Injury Survival Guide in 2006 to help educate Veterans, their family members, VA medical staff, veteran service organizations, nonprofit organizations and several federal and state agencies about concussions and traumatic brain injuries. In 2007, I received the State of Vermont Traumatic Brain Injury Survivor of the Year Award for outstanding commitment, perseverance, and advocacy.

I'm 46 years old now and according to my neurologist at a Veterans Affairs Polytrauma / TBI Clinic, I suffer every day with "severe post-concussion syndrome (or worse)" from the cumulative effects of those 13 concussions and a few others I had received in my

20's and 30's. I've spent over a decade in rehabilitation for vision, hearing, balance, speech, swallowing, muscle spasms and other damage to my brain.

I continue to advocate for Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injuries so they too can live long and meaningful lives. I've provided a lot of suicide prevention and saved a lot of Veterans lives by drawing upon my personal experience from 1985 through 1988. Those Veterans have gone on to help other Veterans break the STIGMA and get help for their INVISIBLE injuries.

Like Veterans, brain-injured athletes need a safe and supportive way of getting the help they need to heal and return to play or end their careers if they choose to do so. A healthy and honorable alternative to the old way of having stigma and peer pressure force them to play hurt, end their careers alone in shame or commit suicide.

I'm a member of the Krempels Center, a nonprofit organization located in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, dedicated to improving the lives of people living with brain injury from trauma, tumor or stroke. In partnership with universities and community volunteers, they offer programs that engage members in meaningful and productive experiences and provide ongoing support and resources to survivors and their families. The staff and other members participate in a group called "Man Cave" where we talk about men's issues and what it really means to be a man. I thank each and every one of them for giving me the inspiration to write this article which I've wanted and needed to write for such a long time.

After receiving a traumatic brain injury in 2001, I developed Post Trauma Vision Syndrome and Auditory Processing Disorder. My brain was over stimulated by visual and auditory inputs and it prevented me from doing many daily activities which people take for granted like going to the grocery store, sporting events and my children's concerts.

In 2014, my neurologist, Dr. James Whitlock, gave me a referral to a vision specialist, Dr. Kevin Chauvette at Merrimack Vision Care in New Hampshire. After 40 sessions of vision therapy, I was once again able to see in 3d and listen to music as loud as I wanted. It was amazing being able to make it past the 2nd aisle of the grocery store and attend all of my children's school and sporting events!

I heard the song "In the Dark" by Billy Squier on the radio and found it easy to put my concussion legacy to the words. I contacted Billy Squier and asked him for permission to

use his song lyrics along with my commentary to raise awareness about sports concussions. I'm very grateful to him for giving me permission to do so. I hope our words together will educate people about the dangers of not disclosing and seeking help for sports concussions. I hope our words can help athletes out of a bad situation if they are currently in one like I was 30 years ago.

**Originally Published on [The Good Men Project](#)*

Meet Ted Stachulski

Ted Stachulski is a former multi-sport athlete, Marine Corps Veteran, Traumatic Brain Injury Survivor, creator of the *Veterans Traumatic Brain Injury Survivor Guide*. Ted is also a Veterans Outreach Specialist and an advocate for brain injury survivors, their family members and caregivers.



Living With Hope

By Patrick Brigham



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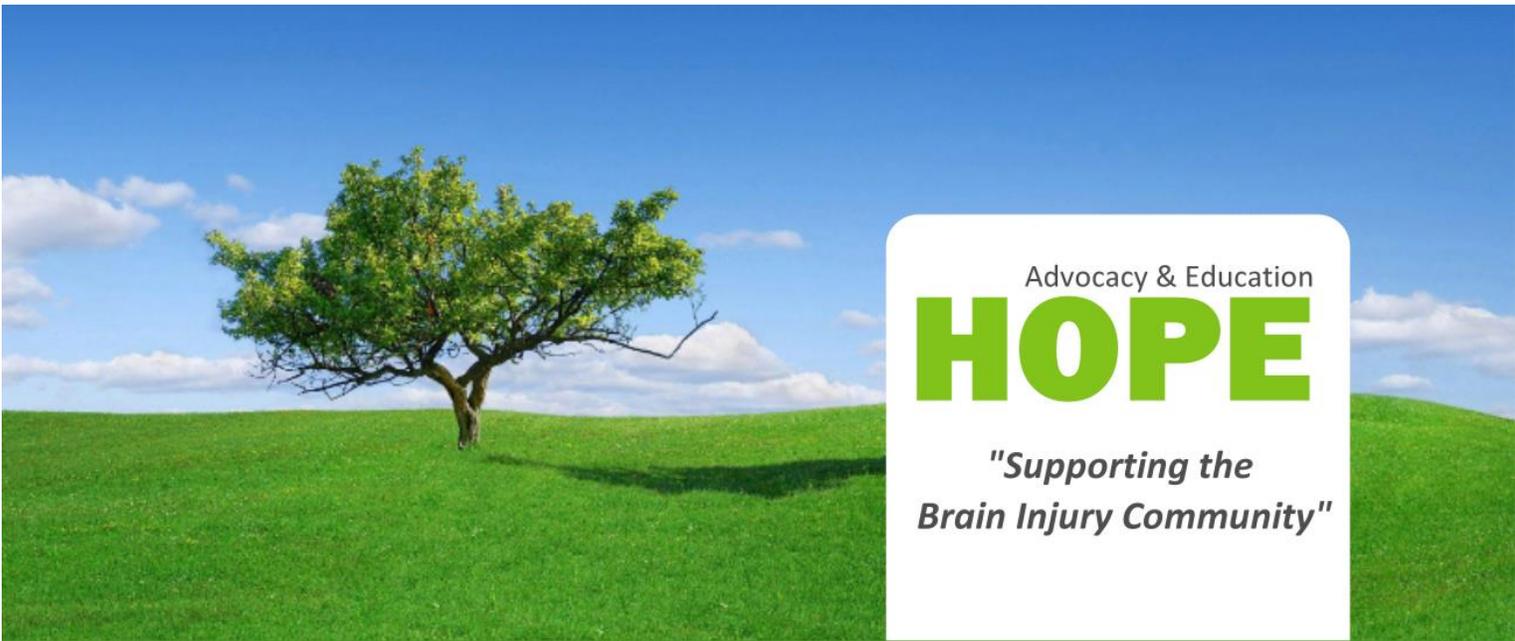
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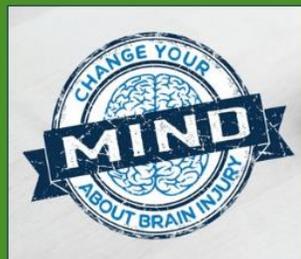
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The background of the top section of the page is a close-up, soft-focus image of pink feathers. The feathers are layered and have a delicate, intricate texture. A white rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of this image, containing the title and author information.

An Energizer Ostrich

by Donna O'Donnell Figurski

What do you get when you cross a hyperactive rabbit with a pink-feathered bird on a beach? That would be ME – in other words, an Energizer-Ostrich.

I guess that title warrants an explanation of sorts. But, I will have to retrace my steps a bit – about eleven years' worth – to the source of what changed me into the equivalent of the Energizer Bunny with her head in the sand.

On January 13th, eleven years ago, David, my husband, suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

On the morning of January 13th, I awoke with a start at precisely 7:05 AM – the exact time eleven years ago that David and I began the journey of our new and unexpected life. We did not know what was in store for us. We didn't even know if there was going to be an "us." I relived the moments of David's TBI: his excruciating pain, the wild ambulance ride, my signing on the dotted line, the taking of a saw to my husband's skull (I didn't do that – the surgeon did), my talking incessantly on my cell phone arranging and rearranging flights and accommodations, my squeezing David's hand and promising him that he would get better, even though I wasn't sure that he would, and my "threatening" that I would never forgive him if he didn't fight to stay with me.

And then, my telling the story - over and over and over - of how David stumbled into our bedroom with his hand clutching his eye and falling into a coma as the paramedics strapped an oxygen mask over his face.

I shuddered as I remembered the surgeon greeting me with the words, “Your husband is in good health. He will make a great organ donor.” I cringed when he told me that David had very little chance of surviving his brain surgery. Then after the surgery, his words, which should have encouraged me, plunged me to the depths of despair.



He said that the surgery went well and David was on a respirator and in neurological intensive care (NICU) but, if morning came and there was no improvement, we should “pull the plug.” He justified his statement by saying that David was a professor and he wouldn’t want to be a vegetable.

After eleven years, I would have expected these intense memories to fade somewhat, but they remain vivid, with just a few blurred edges. I remember many of the names of the nurses and caregivers. I remember the unwanted words of the doctor.

I remember how family and friends converged on the hospital at all hours, both during the day and well into the night, from all corners of the United States. I remember the day was one of intense fog, both outdoors and inside my brain. The outdoor fog caused airline flights to be delayed. The “fog” inside my brain insulated me from the tragic reality around me.

Over the years, my “fog” has dulled the pain of watching David struggle to dress himself and learn to feed himself again, to walk again, and to talk again. My “fog” obscured the hurt of seeing David hunched over his keyboard painstakingly tapping each key as he prepared another paper for publication or worked on a book of international research he was editing for a scientific publisher, or sent detailed instructions to the technicians in his lab about the next experiment to do. I also welcomed the “fog” as I not-so-patiently waited for David to recover from eye surgery.

I marvel at this man I call my husband. I'm proud of David's accomplishments, both before and after his trauma. I admire his patience, his persistence, and his positive attitude, as I watch him tackle life in the "hard" lane. He does it with grace, with no complaint, and with gentle optimism.

So, there is an "us" after TBI, though it's a different "us." We are not the same people we were before David's trauma. I miss the pre-TBI "us." A traumatic brain injury seriously changes the victim, but it also alters the spouse. It's known that a TBI can end marriages. A TBI can tear families apart. Or, in some fortunate cases like ours, a brain injury can make the marriage stronger.

David's TBI tears my heart every day. But each day, my heart also gets glued back together with a kiss, a smile, a hug, or a laugh – and there are no tears.

I still have not had a good cry. Life is too busy for tears. Besides, "Tears would make this too real – and it's not ... is it?" asks the Energizer-Ostrich.

Meet Donna O'Donnell Figurski

Donna O'Donnell Figurski is a wife, mother, and granny. She is a teacher, playwright, actor, director, writer, picture-book reviewer. January 13, 2005, Donna became the caregiver for her husband and best friend, David. Donna had never heard of "TBI" before David's cerebellar hemorrhage. Donna spends each day writing a blog, called "Surviving Traumatic Brain Injury," preparing her radio show, "Another Fork in the Road," on the Brain Injury Radio Network.



*"Traumatic brain injury is the last thing you think about... until it's the only thing you think about!"
~Anonymous*



Above the Tree Line

by Jeff Sebell

In my search for simplicity and peace, places where I can escape the confusion, stimulation and seeming ignorance of the modern world, I sometimes find myself thinking about those times I have been hiking above tree line.

Above tree line there is no electronic beeping and booping. No humming of electric appliances. No bright lights.

Nothing to make me feel like I'm in the intensive care ward.

Just the rock ptarmigans, the mountain goats, and me.

But the stillness and lack of noise aren't the only things that make this place special and attractive to me; the landscape becomes otherworldly and magical.

Above tree line the world changes. As the elevation increases, the environment becomes harsher and more special. As you go higher the trees become smaller until only dwarf shrubs remain, while the other vegetation consists of perennial grasses, mosses, lichens and other low-to-the-ground plants.

Being Up There

One time, just before dusk, when spending the night in an Appalachian Mountain club hut in New Hampshire, I hiked to just below Franconia Ridge and watched the sunset. I was spellbound. I felt totally solid and at peace.

Above tree line the only thing I could hear was the wind, and I could hear different dimensions to it. I could hear the winds that smoothly blew the grasses into flowing waves. I could hear another level of wind that gently rustled the brittle leaves of the low bushes, and still a third level of wind that swirled up by my head.



This was the peace I had come to find, that I needed so much in order to invigorate me. So often the world confuses me or overstimulates me, and I just want a vacation from all the noise and the commotion. I want to be in a place where it is still and it is quiet, except for maybe the white noise of the wind: a place where I am left with just my thoughts...or maybe nothing at all. Sometimes I think of it as wanting to be back in a coma, which is a very strange thought indeed.

That day, just below Franconia Ridge, as dusk and stillness were gaining, I turned my headlight on and hiked down to the hut in the darkness. When I got back to the hut there were a few people outside who commented that they had wondered about that mysterious light bouncing down the mountain, but then they saw my headlamp and laughed.

A Fitting Place

The animals have evolved and adapted to the environment here. In other areas, in the rocky crags, life gets even more specialized. Mountain goats climb the sides of the cliffs; their bodies perfectly suited to life on the side of a mountain. That is their domain.

Having my life turned around as the result of a brain injury, I sometimes feel as though I am searching for my perfect place, my domain. I used to think I knew what that was, but what I used to think isn't always the case. Therefore, I am on a quest.

Being on a quest to find suitable surroundings isn't such a unique idea, but the circumstances around my quest make it fairly unique. My coma changed me. Just like

that: physically, emotionally, and cognitively. The combination of these changes, together with the trauma, have fueled the quest to find a fitting place, where life is simpler and easier to understand.

That is what brought me above tree line. There is nothing to protect me. I am at the mercy of the elements. There is nowhere to escape when lightning strikes. I have to learn to adapt, just as I did after my brain injury, like the sure footed mountain goat on the side of a cliff.

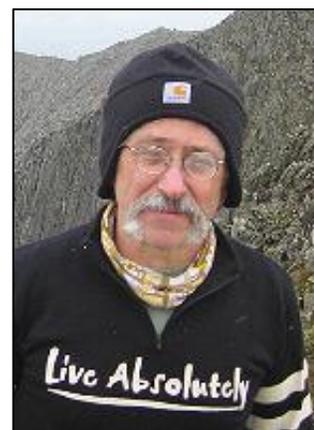
Sometimes “life”, (electronics, people, cars, noise) makes me feel like half a person, while being above tree line, where life is precious and stark, makes me feel alive.

I always want to have that up "above tree line" feeling, but I know I can't. I want to be above it all, listening and watching for the little things that are so special, and I want to be where the air is clear and it is peaceful. Somehow I need to integrate that into my life, but how can you be down there and up here at the same time?

I don't know if there is a way, but at least I know those things are here, and that my own tree line is waiting for me. Maybe someday I can be at peace in the world, but right now I just need to be above that line, where I can be clean and clear.

Meet Jeff Sebell

Jeff is a nationally published author, speaker and blogger - writing about Traumatic Brain Injury and the impacts of his own TBI which he suffered in 1975 while attending Bowdoin College. His book "[Learning to Live with Yourself after Brain Injury](#)," was released in August of 2014 by Lash Publishing. Jeff is a regular monthly contributor to TBI HOPE Magazine.



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Relearning... Everything!

by Valerie Jo Smith

My name is Valerie-Jo Smith. I am a 52 year old mother of two adult children and four grandchildren, so far. My traumatic brain injury journey began on August 15, 1989. I was in an automobile accident that resulted in a closed head injury. The brain swelling caused a blood vessel to rupture causing bleeding in the brain, or a cardiovascular accident. The result is that I have left sided hemiplegia; which is my whole body is paralyzed on the left side.

I was in a coma for two weeks and then placed in a medically induced coma for two more weeks making it a month total. Upon first waking up from the coma I only have vague memories of family members being with me, but I did not know why or where this was or what they were talking about as I drifted in and out. As I woke up more often and for longer periods of time, I realized I was in the hospital. I was unable to speak and we discovered I was legally blind after some time and testing. My vision has improved and healed some since then, thank God. I still have a peripheral deficit in both eyes and have floaters.

I had to re-learn everything! From sitting up to walking, using the bathroom/continence to my ABC's to reading and talking. When I left the hospital after three months of rehabilitation (speech, physical, and occupational) I had to learn to do everything left-handed when I had formerly been right-handed. Brain injury is a lifelong recovery journey, but if you stick with it, keep a positive attitude, and look at what you can still do

and give, eventually you can discover a new life and joys. While learning all my daily living activities, I also had two children to raise who were eight months and one and a half years at the time. I knew that my life would never be the same but I prayed, hoped, and strived for the ability to make a new and better life plan - one day and one small achievement at a time.

I learned to mourn the loss of the use of my limbs and everything that resulted from my brain injury. My children were a blessing to me in my recovery because they motivated me to get better for them and kept the focus off of me. I moved into my parents' house with my children. My parents and siblings were a godsend and were by my side the whole time, giving me the courage, hope, faith, and strength to pick myself up and begin a new life. My mother taught me by her own example that life was out there and definitely worth living.

After about a year, I moved out of my parents' house on my own with my children. I struggled to cope with daily living activities and being the mother I once was and still wanted to be again. There were many struggles and sadness but also many joys. I was glad to be home with them. As they grew and demanded less of my physical time, but always my emotional love, I began to look for other ways in which to reach out. I have volunteered and worked for a few different places, including the Disability Resource Center, caregiving in a private home, the Brain Injury Peer Visitor Association, and Avita Community Partners.

Currently I am co-facilitating at the Saddleback Church brain injury support group. My goal is to provide faith, encouragement, empathy, and education through my personal life with family and friends who are my world. I love and feel honored to be part of any foundation that reaches out to provide the opportunity to share with others, networking and educating, so that no one ever feels hopeless and alone.



I know that in my giving, I always receive back the same or more encouragement and that my life and family is important and worthwhile. I am still able to have dreams and realize

them as I reach out to have a full life and make a difference. Through God, who has been with me through it all, I have found that His plans are always better than mine and I have joy, happiness, and peace that passes all understanding.

Meet Valerie Jo Smith

Valerie is a mother of two adult children and a very happy grandmother. Her TBI journey began in August, 1989, after she was in an automobile accident that resulted in a closed head injury (brain injury).

The head swelling caused a blood vessel to rupture, resulting in a cardiovascular accident. The result was that her whole body paralyzed on the left side. She lives a life that includes sharing her experiences with others. You can read more of her story [here](#).



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TBI HOPE Back Page



From the Desk of the Publisher...

Summer is here in full swing in the northern hemisphere. Our local landscape is dotted with folks enjoying summer activities of all kinds. From cookouts to hiking – to just relaxing in a hammock with a good book, it’s such a great time to recharge and reflect on life.

Many of us who live lives as TBI survivors so often define life as “before and after.” In my own life before brain injury, I was in perpetual motion – everything I did, I rushed through so I could move on to the next item of perceived importance.

No longer do I live this type of hectic life. Life is slower now, and much more meaningful. My wife Sarah and I are recent new grandparents and in two ticks of a clock, our lives forever changed again.



Wherever your path may take you, I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the blessings in your own life. While all of us who have been touched in some way by TBI have very unique changes, there is good to be found in every life – if you take the time to look.

Peace to all affected by TBI,

David