

February 2017

# TBI HOPE

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MAGAZINE

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### **TBI HOPE MAGAZINE**

*Serving All Impacted by  
Brain Injury*

**February 2017**

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Welcome to the February 2017 issue of TBI HOPE Magazine!

Regular readers of our magazine already know that we present a variety of stories that offer true hope and inspiration after brain injury. Around here, we like to think of it as "practical hope." Every brain injury is different, every outcome unique.

As such, we hand-pick our monthly articles mindful of those that will most benefit our readership. No false hope, no unreasonable expectations – just candid, forward-moving information through the eyes of those who know it best.

This month's issue is remarkable, even by our standards. You'll read the very timely tale of an NFL wife who offers more insight than you'll ever get on mainstream media. A Wounded Warrior from our home state of New Hampshire tells his remarkable story. And we close with a special expanded story about a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. This Mountie's story is nothing short of remarkable.

Next month, we celebrate the two year anniversary of our magazine. Never did we envision two short years ago the meteoric growth of TBI HOPE Magazine. But there is such a need for realistic information about life after brain injury. We are grateful to play a small part in helping to end the silence that surrounds brain injury.

Peace,



David A. Grant  
*Publisher*

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*TBI HOPE Magazine Now  
Reaches over 30 Countries*



## Resilience is my Resolution

By Ric Johnson



**A**fter that awful day when I fell from a ladder and survived a traumatic brain injury, I was able to understand my difficulties quite early. Accepting that I wasn't actually the same person didn't really slow me down. I went through therapy sessions with as much positive energy as I could, knowing that being optimistic would be better than being pessimistic.

When I tried to do anything I did before that fateful day, whether it was a daily chore or a regular task, I tackled it with as much strength as possible. However, nothing was easy

anymore: cleaning dishes, making the bed, folding clothes and moving them into the correct dresser, mowing the lawn. It didn't matter how much "physical" work was involved. When I finished, it was nap time. Why? Because it was brain work.

There are a few tasks I'm physically unable to handle. Doing most anything I did before my injury is still an ongoing process and will possibly never be finished. However, that doesn't mean I failed at being a survivor. There is no "passing" grade, and I am the only judge and jury.

There is nothing to gain by sitting down and thinking about "what could have been." I know that's easy to say, but we have to become resilient to take another step forward. Look at everything you've accomplished and gained. You did things because you fought through those difficulties. We made our brain remember how to remember. We trained ourselves not to give up. We taught ourselves to become resilient.

I am not defined by my injury and have never heard of any other survivor who considers himself that way. As long as we don't let our injury define who we are, we will still recover and get better. Resilience is one of the most important aspects of recovery.

Maybe we will have to bend a little bit, but that doesn't mean we have to stop. Maybe we have to ask for help, but that doesn't mean we are weak. Maybe our injury makes us so mad we can cry, and that's okay too. Take a break and cry until you're cried out. Then, take a long deep breath, and stand up and take on the world.

“

***As long as we don't let our injury define who we are, we will still recover and get better.***

”

“Keep calm and keep moving” is a phrase that all brain injury survivors should have wired into their thoughts. Being resilient means finding good thoughts that keep us calm. Being resilient means moving forward instead of waiting.

Being resilient means to believe in ourselves, which also means we can handle tomorrow and the days after that.

**“Brain injury is the LAST thing you think about – until it’s the ONLY thing you think about.”**

## Meet Ric Johnson



*Ric Johnson is a husband, father, grandfather and a traumatic brain injury survivor from just over 13 years.*

*Ric is also a member of the Speaker Bureau for the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance, and facilitator for The Courage Kenny Brain Injury Support Group.*

## Living With Hope

By Patrick Brigham



# Sarah's Story

By Ryan Bradshaw & Sarah Layden



**S**arah has gladly shared her story to raise awareness of being safe on the bike trails. The traumatic brain injury team at city hospital Nottingham has been a lifeline and Sarah owes a lot to them. To think their service will possibly be cut to just 16 weeks for patients who suffer a brain injury is unimaginable. Sarah is now 2 years post injury and still needs their support but Sarah is now back at work because of them.

On the 27th of June, my partner Sarah and I went out riding at our local jumps. After a great day's riding with lots of photos and videos shot, we were on our way back home with high spirits because we were also going to Wales the next day for a week of riding and uplifts. On the route home we passed through the old quarry. Sarah being Sarah wanted to do a few more drop offs before going back for some grub. After a couple of drops, the famous last (cursed) words were said: "one last go." In our experience, that never ends well! Sarah shot over the drop (even though we asked her not to, but girls will be girls) way too fast. She was bucked up when she hit the rock drop off which flew her over the bars. She fell over 30 feet before landing on her head.

After the realization of what happened set in, and the fact that she wasn't moving, I ran down the sheer rock face. Whilst trying to pull her bike off her that was tangled up in her legs, I realized it was worse than first thought. I slowly rolled her face over, which is when the real panic set in. The thought that I'd lost her there and then was a feeling I will never forget. She was unconscious, not breathing, and had cuts and grazes on her face, with blood and grit in her mouth. I placed her in the recovery position and she eventually gasped for air.



Luckily, one of our friends was with us and he spoke with emergency rescue. My concerns included the fact that we were in the middle of an unused quarry with no road access, so I interrupted the phone call with "we need a helicopter, get a helicopter!" The lady on the end of the phone was great. She sent every available unit that was in the area - six ambulances and the requested helicopter.

Our friend drove out of the quarry to the nearest road to direct the paramedics in on foot. He did a great job and carried a lot of the equipment back. Whilst he was gone, it felt like the loneliest place on the planet as Sarah started to drift in and out of consciousness. I was so relieved to see the paramedics arrive in numbers and I let them take over. Only a few minutes later it was my turn to help out again as we could hear the helicopter arriving. Thank God for Bear Grylls! Because of his wild programs,

I knew I had to find a safe landing place for the helicopter and get high and visible so they could locate us. I waved them in (just like Bear would have done), then they took over and loaded her into the helicopter. The last thing they said to us before they flew away was that she was conscious and she would be ok. We picked up her stuff and I rode the two bikes home, which wasn't the easiest thing to do.



We made our way to the hospital and heard the devastating news that she couldn't regain consciousness and was now in a coma. This had officially become the worst day of my life. They told us they were going to try and wake her the following day, which was great news after a tough night. She came around a few hours later that day.

Although not in great shape, we were just happy she pulled through. A couple of days later she started communicating with us again and one of the first things she asked was "Is my bike ok?" Somehow, it was unscathed. She was moved out of intensive care to a quieter ward where she celebrated her birthday.

Every day she would ask if she could go home and when could she ride her bike. After spending a few weeks in hospital, we now have her home.

She has absolutely amazed the doctors on her recovery rate (as they have all seen the video after a 30-foot drop onto her head). She's had some small tears to the brain but no bleeds, brain damage or any breakages which is a bit of a miracle.

She can't wait to get back on her bike again and hit the jumps. It's now looking like she'll make a full recovery. The first thing she worked on during her physio session was a bike!

## Meet Sarah Layden



*Sarah Layden, known as "Sassie" to those close to her, is from Nottingham, England.*

*Sarah studied nursing at the University of Manchester, graduating in 2006.*

*When she's not out biking the local hills, valleys and mountains, she enjoys time spent with friends and family.*

*Her recovery continues!*

**“Hope is the feeling we have that the feeling we have is not permanent.” ~M. McLaughlin**

# A Letter

By Nicole Bingaman



Dear Traumatic Brain Injury,

You came into our home almost three years ago with no invitation, no introduction, and no preparation for your never-ending presence. I have since learned that this is how you operate; you just show up in some series of unexpected events. There is no protocol for when you arrive. One moment we don't have any clue of your existence and the next you are all we know, and it feels as if knowing you has been eternal.

Thanksgiving Eve of 2012, we did not know your name, and we were not well acquainted enough to recognize your face. You waltzed in silently and escorted my bright, strong, beautiful, and full of life, 21-year-old son down a flight of stairs in his home, where he was supposed to be safe. You all but destroyed him.

A fall down thirteen stairs in close to thirteen seconds would forever alter the person we knew and loved, the person we ultimately needed. Our introductions to you were made with words like devastating, coma, brain bleeds, fractures, skull plates, swelling, and the most horrific words of them all, "He may not survive."

In that first night, within those initial moments, you stole many of our hopes, dreams, and chances at the things we used to take for granted. In place of them you gave challenges, frustrations, and endless new maps to navigate.

You would also bring out something else in us: unyielding fight, determination, and hope.

I still remember the first time I saw Taylor's eyes after you entered his brain. Your cracks, unimaginable bumps, breaks and bruises had an effect on him that caught me unprepared. I searched for my son, but instead found a person who was void of Taylor's light, his spark, and the love that connected us. Where was our Taylor and would he ever return? I knew none of this was going to be easy, and yet I was thankfully unaware of just how grueling it would become.

Together, our family would spend months in the ICU, inpatient rehab, and endless days of physical, cognitive, occupational, and speech therapies. In the beginning, all of the therapies were sponsored by specialists, but as time moved on, and insurance approval grew slim, creativity was forced in charting the continued course.

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“

***You have brought me to my knees, and yet made me stand taller than I ever thought I could.***

”

All the while, missing my son, I tried to explain to people that even though Taylor was here, so was something else that had taken so much of him, and that would be you, Traumatic Brain Injury.

I have hated you since the day we met. You have made me sadder than I ever imagined.

You have made me weaker and more exhausted than I ever conceived. You have made me angry and bitter, and you have taken not only bits and pieces of the son I love so very much but huge parts of my own heart as well. In reality, you have taken something from every single person in our family. You have changed the course of our lives, and we are still adjusting.

After nearly three years, I still find myself trying to make peace with you. I have screamed at you, and at times you produced an endless flow of tears that left my face raw with irritation from how many have fallen.

You have brought me to my knees, and yet made me stand taller than I ever thought I could. I have felt your defeat and agony, and I have felt the victories that come from witnessing the powerful implications of a recovery that takes place one moment at a time.

I have grown as a mother, as an advocate, and as a person. I have learned how to work with what I cannot change or fix.

I have learned that letting go of some expectations of our survivor and ourselves is not only crucial but also necessary.

I have learned that I really don't have to be afraid of you, traumatic brain injury, because at the end of each day, you may have taken us for another wild ride, but we have been victorious.

How do I accept your unwanted and unwelcome presence? I try to work with you, and not against you. I remain certain that you are not stronger than the force of love, family, and friends that encircle us.

I try my best to work within the parameters that you have set while knowing that there is a fierce fire within us that is greater than the devastation you brought.

Dear traumatic brain injury, you have made my sons, my husband, and myself, warriors, and I believe that in the end, we will be better human beings because you are here.

From,

A Strong, Yet Broken, Mother's Heart

## **Meet Nicole Bingaman**



*Nicole has worked in the human service field for over twenty years. Since Taylor's injury Nicole has become an advocate and spokesperson within the TBI community.*

*Nicole's book "[Falling Away From You](#)" was published and released in 2015. Nicole continues to share Taylor's journey on Facebook. Nicole firmly believes in the mantra that "Love Wins."*

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Because a TBI Affects Everyone!



[www.facebook.com/TbiCaregiverSupport](http://www.facebook.com/TbiCaregiverSupport)

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**We'll give you one guess...**

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# A Caregiver's Perspective

By Sarah Grant



**W**hen my husband was injured back in 2010, we were newlyweds with eight children and we had full schedules. I'd gone to visit a friend in the hospital while my husband left for his 30-mile daily bicycle ride. Who knew we'd see each other again at the local trauma center? He was hit by a car that Veteran's day, by a teenage schoolmate of our children. As the weeks and months passed after his diagnosis of traumatic brain injury, neither of us suspected that the accident would change us forever.

In the beginning, he suffered from many nightmares and was later diagnosed with PTSD. He had constant ringing in his ears and shook his head a lot as if to cast off the tinnitus that never ceased. He forgot things – so many things, including conversations and appointments. He lost the concept of time, and an hour in the real world only felt like a couple of minutes to him. The passage of time was a big deal when I couldn't reach him and messages were left unanswered. He was plagued with constant thoughts of suicide and felt that I would be better off without him.

Our children were confused and some of them walked away from us and our problems. Friends stopped calling because they felt helpless and family members saw us for small windows of time and let us know we looked “fine”. At work, my co-workers were concerned about how my husband was doing, but they were also concerned about me. I was tired all the time and I was scattered, in thoughts and in actions.

I initially contacted the Brain Injury Association to locate some support groups nearby that my husband could attend. He needed help coping with his loss of “self” and we thought it would be a good idea to learn everything we could about TBI. We found a local group for survivors only and he flourished there. The members had varying experiences, and lots of compensatory strategies were identified and perfected in their time spent together each month. Suddenly, he had hope.

I wanted hope too!

After about a year, my husband’s survivor group was extended to include caregivers. Each month, I looked forward to talking with other spouses about how they kept it all together, and what things worked well in managing their households.

Eventually, the survivors – and specifically MY survivor – didn’t want their foibles discussed openly. I stopped attending the support group so he could continue to grow into his new self. I was alone.

I considered separating myself from his TBI. The relationship we were in before the accident was kind and loving and mutually supportive; I wanted the best for my husband and our children.

“

*Each month, I looked forward to talking with other spouses about how they kept it all together, and what things worked well in managing their households.*

”



## Meet Sarah Grant



*Sarah lives in Salem, NH with her husband and two kittens.*

*She started an online Caregiver group in 2013, to help make sense of what she was experiencing and it has grown to almost 7,000 members around the world.*

*She can usually be found outdoors, enjoying life with her husband.*

*Sarah's Caregiver group can be found at*  
[www.facebook.com/TBICaregiverSupport](http://www.facebook.com/TBICaregiverSupport)

Our relationship after the accident was no longer mutually giving and rewarding; it felt like an obligation and was sometimes one-sided.

My personal search for a support group started and ended in one single day: there were no meetings specifically for Caregivers in the entire state of New Hampshire. That had to change! Caregivers are the people who love and support survivors. I didn't want to find out what happened to caregivers who weren't loved and supported.

Our local library agreed to host space for a group meeting each month. I sent emails to all of my friends; I posted flyers around town; I sent an invitation to all of my contacts on Facebook. We had a caregiver group!

Each month, I look forward to our group meeting. When group members are unable to attend, several of us still talk via email. I've learned that support comes in many ways, and even in giving, I receive. Parents, spouses, and family members have attended the group and each has contributed a piece of the puzzle that is my life since my husband's accident. I still don't know how many pieces are missing in my personal puzzle, but I do know that getting together to share our common bond helps me feel stronger and more supported.

# An NFL Wife's Story

By Cyndy Feasel



“If I’d only known what I loved the most would end up killing me and taking away everything I loved, I would have never done it.”

These were among the last words spoken to me by my late husband. He was talking about playing professional football.

Unless you’re a longtime Seattle Seahawks fan of a certain age, you’ve never heard of Grant Feasel. Grant was the starting center and long snapper for the Seahawks from 1987 to 1992 after starting his professional football career with the old Baltimore Colts in 1983. While playing 117 games in the National Football League, Grant was just another anonymous offensive lineman who toiled in the trenches, banging up his battered body with every snap of the ball. Those jarring collisions with powerful nose guards took their toll on Grant in physical, mental, and spiritual ways.

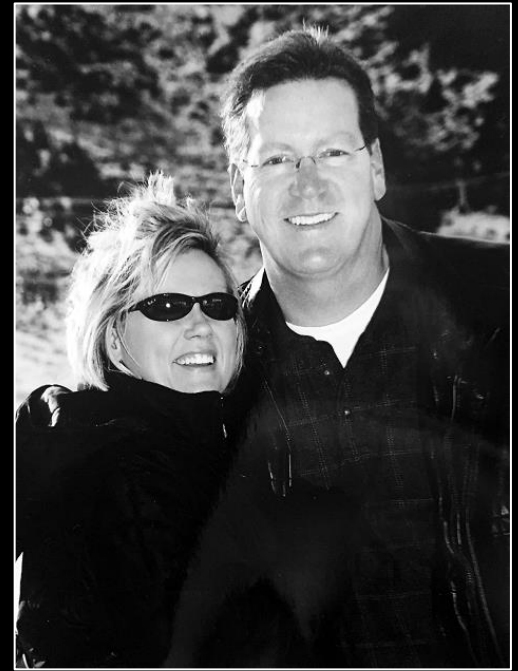
You see, Grant drank himself to death—a slow, lingering process that took nearly twenty years. He didn’t press a gun to his heart and pull the trigger like San Diego Chargers linebacker Junior Seau did, but Grant committed suicide all the same. He drank to dull the pain that began in his brain—a brain muddled by a history of repetitive trauma and symptomatic concussions. He drank and drank . . . until the alcohol killed him.

Grant's death certificate lists "ESLD" (end-stage liver disease, a form of cirrhosis of the liver) as the cause of his demise, but our family later learned that he also suffered from a degenerative brain disease known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, which has been the focus of lawsuits from former NFL players and the topic of a Hollywood movie, *Concussion*, starring Will Smith.

And then there was the collateral damage. I can assure you that what happened to Grant during our adult years together destroyed our marriage, devastated my relationship with our three children, and left me destitute. All because he played a violent game that entertains tens of millions of football fans every Sunday.

My story is difficult to read and raw in many ways, but I want to put a human face on what can happen to an NFL player and his family long after the cheering has stopped. My life and our children's lives became a living hell because of the way alcohol became his medication for a disease that had its roots in the scores of concussions he suffered on the football field.

His helmet-to-helmet collisions opened the door to brain trauma that impacted his thought processes, accelerated his physical deterioration, and altered his personality. In the end, he realized that football had cost him everything - his life, his relationship with me, and his family.



“

***In the end, he realized that football had cost him everything - his life, his relationship with me, and his family.***

”

# TBI FACTS

## National TBI Estimates

30.5%

TBI contributes to 30.5 percent of all injury related deaths in the United States each year.

52,000 deaths per year!

## Top Causes of TBI

35.2%

Slip & fall injuries are the top cause of TBI's in the nation

17.3%

Automobile accident injuries account for 17.3 percent of TBI's

16.5%

Objects striking the head cause 16.5 percent of all TBI's each year

## TBI Facts

\$

Total Cost of TBI's Per Year in the U.S.

60 Billion

Person icon

Percent of TBI individuals who are single

47%

Person icon

Percent of TBI individuals who are employed, part or full-time

57%

2X

Men are two times more likely to experience TBI than women

2X

Those are important points because the Grant Feasel I fell in love with and brought three children into this world with was not the Grant Feasel I said goodbye to at the age of fifty-two. My husband was someone I adored and respected, a godly man of character who wanted to be the best at what he did—until hits to the head and jarring of his brain resulted in a slow, steady progression of subtle changes to his personality, his work ethic, and his ability to think clearly.

I also want to raise awareness for parents about the dangers of playing sports that produce concussions. I'm an art teacher at Fort Worth Christian School, a private pre-K through 12th grade school in North Richland Hills, Texas. Every football season, a handful of my middle school students miss up to a week of classroom instruction because of concussions they received while playing organized football and soccer.

While many think that concussions are synonymous with football, the head-butting sport of soccer produces the most concussive events by virtue of its popularity and the fact that both boys and girls play the sport.

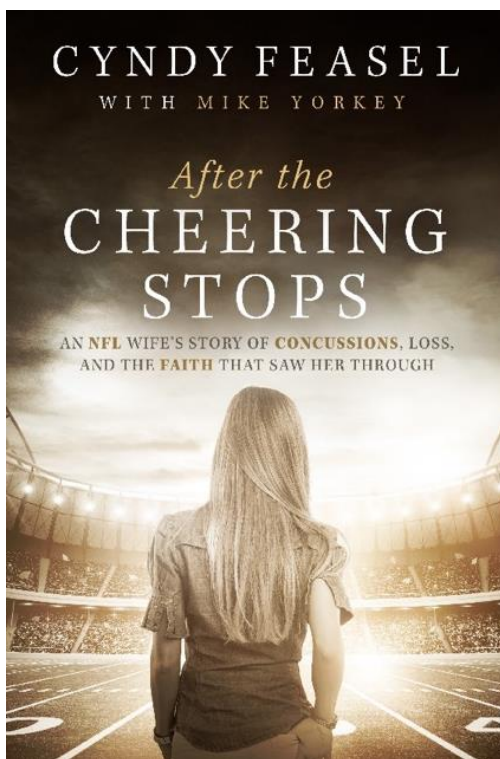
In addition, a study published in the *American Journal of Sports Medicine* showed that girls playing soccer experienced concussions at nearly twice the rate of boys.

And if you played contact sports in high school and were concussed, then you need to be aware that you could be traveling down

the same road that Grant trod - especially if you are using alcohol or prescriptive drugs to dull those lingering aches and pains.

Finally, I want to make this point: I know that Grant would not want his name to be remembered this way, but I also know that he would want me to warn others about the dangers of CTE. He always admired the way I could talk to anyone about anything, and he liked me to fill in the gaps for him with groups of people.

I consider my new book, *After the Cheering Stops*, to be a continuation of a relationship that started with such promise but ended so tragically.



[Buy Now on Amazon](#)

## **Meet Cyndy Feasel**



*Cyndy Feasel is an art teacher at Fort Worth Christian School in North Richland Hills, Texas. She grew up in the Dallas suburb of Garland and attended Abilene Christian University. After graduating, she became a primary school teacher and married Grant, who was drafted by the Baltimore Colts in 1983. For the next ten years, Grant played in the NFL.*

*Following Grant's retirement, the family moved back to the Dallas area, where Cyndy raised three children: Sean, Sarah, and Spencer. She returned to the classroom in the late 1990s and teaches art classes from kindergarten to eighth-grade students.*

# Changes after Brain Injury

By Donna O'Donnell Figurski



**E**very brain injury is different. When injury occurs to any part of the brain, there is going to be a change. The part of the brain damaged determines the kind of symptoms experienced. Because the brain is a complex organ, some damage may cause unexpected behaviors or emotional changes.

There are several sections of the brain. Each is responsible for various aspects of daily life. This article shares some of the behavioral and emotional changes that can result from damage to the cerebellum and to the cerebrum: temporal lobe, occipital lobe, parietal lobe, and frontal lobe, a major part of which is the prefrontal cortex.

## An Overview of the Brain

The cerebellum, which is at the base of the skull, controls coordination, balance, equilibrium, and motor-skill memory. Some of the problems that result from damage to this area are: compromised balance (unable to walk), problems with fine-motor skills, and slurring of speech.

The cerebrum is the uppermost region of the central nervous system and is made up of the temporal, occipital, parietal, and frontal lobes. It is also divided into approximately symmetric left and right cerebral hemispheres. With the assistance of the cerebellum, the cerebrum controls all voluntary actions in the body.

## A Closer Look at Brain Injury to the Cerebrum

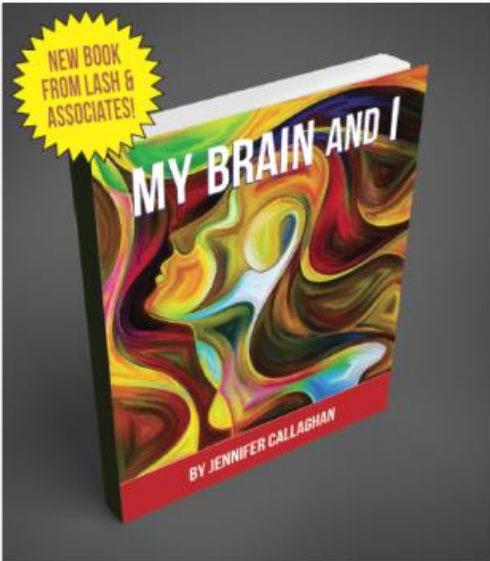
Damage to the temporal lobe can cause problems with hearing, memory, and motor-skill memory. Injury in the temporal lobe may also result in aggressive behavior.

The occipital lobe has to do with vision and vision-related activities. Reading and writing will be affected by damage to this area of the brain. Vision impairment can occur, which includes blurry, tilted, and double vision.

The parietal lobe is responsible for touch perception and the interpretation of visual information. Problems that may occur with damage to this lobe include difficulty in naming objects, difficulty with reading and/or writing, and spatial perception problems that can affect coordination.

# TBI STRUGGLES, OBSTACLES, FRUSTRATIONS...AND TRIUMPHS!

IN HER BOOK "MY BRAIN AND I," JENNIFER CALLAGHAN SHARES HER 16 YEAR JOURNEY



**By Jennifer Callaghan**  
Jennifer Callaghan writes from personal experience on sustaining severe traumatic brain injury and its aftermath. She describes in poignant detail her struggles, obstacles, and frustrations, as well as the triumphs and gains over a 16-year period (after a traffic accident). As her journey continued, Jennifer reveals her thinking, feelings, and perceptions of the world around her. Her recall of these processes is attributable to a thoughtful doctor suggesting she journal what she was happening in her life, which seemed an insurmountable task. The journaling proved to be instructional and rewarding! Also available as an eBook!

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Emotional responses and expressive language are housed in the frontal lobe. Emotions and the skills for problem-solving are dealt with there. The frontal lobe helps folks make sense of the world around them. It's needed to understand others and be empathetic to them. Essentially, the frontal lobe is the emotional and social control area. It also determines and steers personality.

The prefrontal cortex of the frontal lobe controls analytical thinking, thought analysis, and behavior regulation. Executive functions are controlled here too. The prefrontal cortex is the gateway for making good decisions. When this area is injured, the thinking process is affected in such a way that inappropriate behavior is often the result.

The brain is a complicated organ in the body that determines who one is – how one thinks, how one plans, how one feels, and how one acts. A complete understanding of the workings of this now mysterious organ is happening, but that understanding is still in the future.

Several functional parts of the brain have been identified. The symptoms that are experienced usually reflect the specific part of the brain that has been injured. But, scientists still have a long way to go to completely understand the brain. As with any venture on the brink of discovery, we must be patient, while eagerly looking forward to discovering the mysteries of our brains.

## **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.*

*On 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," and preparing for her radio show, "Another Fork in the Road," on the Brain Injury Radio Network.*



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# Confessions of a Concussed Cyclist II

By Jen Dodge



Dear Driver,

Do you realize what today is? Does this day haunt you the way it haunts me? Do you relive it, thinking about what you should have done differently? I do all the time. I think I should never have gone on that bike ride; I should never have been on that street. I think if you had just waited thirty seconds, how different my life would be. Do you realize it has been two years since you robbed me?

Cycling has been my passion for six years. From my first road ride, I fell in love. I enjoyed the speed, the challenge, the reward. I biked near daily, sometimes a few times a day, thousands of miles a year. But you robbed me. I can now only bike when my head allows for it and even then, I may start off feeling great but something triggers my rattled brain and I shut down. Ride over.

Riding is not so carefree for me anymore. I find myself always afraid that the next car will hit me. You robbed me. One thing you don't know about me is that I have six nieces

“

***Dating is hard enough, but it's harder when you have constant migraines and a head injury.***

***Who wants to date a girl that sleeps so much?***

”

and nephews. I love spending time with them, seeing them grow, but you robbed me of this. I get overstimulated by them and their noise levels become too much for me. At dance recitals, I have to close my eyes because the flashing lights now cause a sort of seizure effect. At birthday parties, I need to wear earplugs. At dinners, I need to leave early. I miss time with family and friends. You robbed me.

Since the age of eight, I have wanted to be a Special Education teacher. Nothing else ever appealed to me. Teaching comes naturally to me but even with this, you've robbed me. My ability to do my job has been questioned for two years. Am I able to do it? Is it detrimental to my recovery to stay in this field? If I ever left the Special Education field, it was supposed to be my decision...but you robbed me of this; it may not end on my terms.

Another thing you don't know about me is I always wanted to be a wife and a mother. I've had to let this dream go over the past two years. Dating is hard enough, but it's harder when you have constant migraines and a head injury. Who wants to date a girl that sleeps so much? Or, who cancels at the last minute because her head hurts, and who needs to ration her energy?

The thought of having my own children now seems impossible.

With the amount of sleep I now require and with the constant migraines, how does a child factor into that? You robbed me.

You've robbed me of memories and moments.  
You've robbed me of miles on my bike.  
You've robbed me of dreams and ambitions.

I've tried very hard to not hate you and to let go of my anger. I have not succeeded in this.

I've tried very hard to adjust to my "new normal" and to let go of the "old me." I have not succeeded in this either.

I look back over the past two years. I laugh at how, after one-month post-accident, I was waving my white flag in mercy wanting the migraines to stop (if I only knew then what I was in store for). Then, after six months post-accident, I thought I couldn't handle it anymore.

We are now twenty-four months post-accident... I've stopped thinking my head couldn't hurt any worse because I've learned it can. I've stopped holding my breath at doctor's appointments, hoping that we've found the right combination of medications and injections. I have long forgotten what it feels like to be headache-free. I have long forgotten what it feels like to not be on eggshells waiting for one loud noise or the wrong pitch to send my head into an out of control spiral.

Did you know that some head injuries create pain in the back of the head? Constant pain. It's not a headache per se... But it feels like someone has hit you in the back of the head (hard) and your head is left tender to the touch. There are days when I cringe washing my hair or when I can't even stand to have my head on a pillow. I've had to learn to be gentle with myself and rest when I need to (which is not always an easy thing for me to do). I've learned to watch for signs that I'm not able to go on, and remove myself from



the situation. I've had days when I just sleep all day, or I can't do much more than go from the bed to the couch.

I've been taught "tricks" to get myself out of situations when my brain is on overload and I can't handle anymore. I've had speech therapy to work with me on what to do when my words fail me. I've had cognitive therapy to try and regain some of what I have lost. I've had therapy to work on my embarrassment around these deficits, and to work on my acceptance of them. I hide a lot of what I'm going through on a daily basis. I fake a smile. I hide how I feel, more from some people than others. I hide it because I don't want to be this girl! It's ironic that I am a Special Education teacher and I teach my kids to embrace who they are, to stand up for their needs, to be proud...yet I hide so much of what I'm going through.

I have come so far in two years...but I still have so far to go and it's a long, long, lonely road. I never used to be like this. You robbed me.

I choose not to ride my road bike on this day. The first year, I considered whether I should ride and celebrate that I could, or whether I shouldn't ride and tempt fate. Ultimately, I have decided I do not want to push my luck. August 19th is a permanent rest day!

I remember this date better than I remember my family member's birthdates. There is a lot I've forgotten over the past two years. My memory does not work the way it used to. But I have not forgotten this day.

I remember so clearly everything that happened. I remember the weather. I remember it was our last group ride of the season. I remember we had all just received our new shop jerseys and were proud to sport them. I remember telling my brother I didn't like the route we were taking. I remember screaming at you to "stop!", when I realized you were going to hit me.

“

*I distinctly remember after the accident, laying in the ER, telling my brother that after a good night's sleep I'd be back to riding. I was so naive.*

”

I miss the innocence I had back then. The innocence that said, "I'm young! I'm healthy! I'll be fine in no time!" But the truth is, I'm not fine.

You robbed me. I'm navigating the scary, lonely world of a head injury thanks to you. Tomorrow begins the start of year three post-accident.

A small part of me will continue to have hope that things will get better, but only a small part. After each passing month, it gets harder and harder to have faith in such a thing. In the spirit of having hope, though, I hope you NEVER rob anyone again.

Sincerely,

*A Concussed Cyclist*  
Two Years Post Accident



## Meet Jen Dodge



*Jen is a 34 year old resident of northern New Hampshire. On August 19, 2014, she was hit by an SUV while riding her bicycle on a group ride.*

*Since the accident she has written several articles titled "Confessions of a Concussed Cyclist" to help inform others and as a form of therapy for herself. She is a certified Special Education teacher, and an avid cyclist.*

*Jen uses her own story to encourage people to become informed about the invisible disability of a brain injury and to be kind to cyclists and Share the Road!*

# The Luna Effect, A Wounded Warriors Story

By Mark Lawton



I returned home from Iraq in February 2005. Shortly after that my hauntings began. The twin ghosts of PTSD and TBI were birthed in the same ancient sands that witnessed Lawrence of Arabia's adventures. Strange echoes started to torment my soul from events buried by layers of Iraq's sandstorms.

I was continuously on surveillance for an enigma of an enemy who tormented and challenged my sanity. These phantoms achieved special pleasure in upsetting me. While traveling far from my beloved New England, I received sniper fire from the unknown behind ghostly stonewalls.

In my mind, I felt like a British soldier marching at the ready, from Boston Harbor to Concord through to Lexington and back to Boston. Those colonial carriage roads were lined with mossy stonewalls and trees that transformed into hideous creatures at dusk.

Ancient scribes recorded that on the fourth day of creation, the Mighty Warrior created two great lights in the sky, the Sun to rule the day and the Moon to rule the night.

He painted ancient atlases in the sky called constellations. These routes are stars positioned in the sky for nomads and lost souls to successfully navigate in the darkness.

Like the travelers of antiquity, I needed direction out of the abyss. The Creator of the galaxy utilized the currents and tides to ship a care package to me. Inside this package was a service dog named Luna. It was love at first sight. Miss Luna was to have her own special Luna Effect.

Using her own constellations, Luna became a sleep aid and cut the barbwire of the agoraphobia prison, which held me captive. Depression was so painful that it would leave me shackled in bed. When I got Luna, I was forced to get out of bed to feed and take her out.

I remember how those simple tasks were extremely difficult. Luna senses my down cycles and cuddles with me. On combat missions to town, Luna always rides shotgun and provides a steady paw to help navigate the northeastern storms of adrenalin that blow through my veins.

After decades of playing ball, fishing, swimming, combat missions, sharing food and cheering on the Patriots, Luna developed a serious crush on Julian Edelman and knows when he is on the football field.





## Meet Mark Lawton



*Mark and his wife Miss Mary live in the Mount Washington Valley of New Hampshire. They have been married for thirty years.*

*Mark served in Iraq in a form of chaplaincy ministry. Upon returning from Iraq, Mark was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Two years later he was diagnosed with a Traumatic Brain Injury due to the concussion force of an Improvised Explosive Device while in Baghdad, Iraq.*

*He served in the United States Air Force and later with the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment. He deployed to Iraq in 2004 with NH National Guard Mountain Company and is now medically retired.*

We are often in trouble with Mama, but Luna never throws me under the bus. A better friend I could not have.

Fellow Veterans ask me what it is like to have a service dog. I jokingly say, "Luna is just like a wife, bossy and frequently in my lane."

My VA psych doctor once asked me where my better half was. I quickly asked, "My service dog or my wife?" Not skipping a beat, she said, "Luna is your constant companion and Mary is your better-half, wise guy!" We laughed at that one.

The doctor said Luna is a sweetheart and Luna's effect on me is nothing short of a miracle.

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**"Believe you can and  
you're halfway there."**

**-Theodore Roosevelt**

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# The Obstacle is the Path

By Christa Lessard

## Special Section



**T**oday is Friday the 13th. I am sitting outside in a special backyard relaxation therapy area as I write. Today I am beginning a new chapter in my life: my 11-year career as a police officer is coming to an end.

Four years ago, on September 28th, 2012, I was injured while on duty. As a result, I am receiving a medical discharge and retiring from the force. As part of my discharge, my employer required me to return my uniform(s), that world famous official Red Tunic, my Stetson hat, and other customary items.

I slowly and carefully packed all my police gear into boxes including the forge cap with the iconic buffalo head. I held back tears as I unloaded them one by one at my old office. Once I had completed the transfer, I took the time to cry.

I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness as I watched the boxes of my uniforms and gear leave the police station. I wondered what on earth the police service would do with my used clothing and other items. Watching this transfer of my policing property unfold caused me to reflect back to my days as a general duty Constable; such a great career, I loved policing! I worked hard in my policing career just as I had during high school, my years on the Saskatchewan Cycling Team, and in the various jobs prior to my policing career.

*“I’ve had many amazing and not so amazing memories of my police service which will follow me into the next chapter of my life.”*

I’ve had many amazing and not so amazing memories of my police service which will follow me into the next chapter of my life. I’ve done so many different things: Hostage/Crisis Negotiator, Fitness Coordinator for co-workers, and coach/mentor for newly hired constables. I was also delighted to have been selected to be part of the security detail for the 2010 Olympic Torch run. What a dream job! Imagine, getting paid to run while working. I was honoured to leave behind a legacy by donating my Olympic security uniform to the local Sports Hall of Fame. I am ready for my life journey to continue beyond my time in the police force.

To be honest, I have had many episodes of crying during the past three and one-half years. The loss of my career has been hard but today I am at peace. I know my feelings of sadness will pass, after all, I am a warrior! I’ve always been strong and capable. Even though my permanent injuries have challenged me to the core, they have forced me to be even stronger, even more of a warrior. I’ve developed many ways to cope, not because I wanted to, but it was a necessity, a matter of life or death.

I’ve had an amazing life, blessed with so many opportunities filled with adventure, excitement, hard work and challenges. I have always thought of the challenges as a pain in the butt at the time, but when I think back I realize that I have always successfully conquered any roadblocks I’ve encountered in life. I now know that all of those earlier challenges prepared me for the biggest, most severe, and intense challenge of my life! My challenge has consisted of regaining and rebuilding a new life following a devastating mountain biking accident. Although my memory is not 100% clear about my accident, I will share my story with you.

I was attending a Police Bike Instructor training course in Portland, Oregon hosted by the Law Enforcement Bicycle Association. I had been cycling and racing since the age of 12; in fact, biking was a passion of mine and so I was excited to take this unique elite course.




It was the second-to-last day of the course and we were going on an “off road” ride at the Sandy Ridge trails

near Mount Hood, Oregon. Some of the riders from the Portland Police Bureau had their own personal downhill bikes and therefore did not use police issued bikes. On one particular trail, the group started negotiating up a hill when we were informed the ride was considered a “technical” ride. We were instructed to maintain an appropriate distance from one another.

All the riders were skilled but were at different levels of ability. I quickly identified that given the bike I was riding, I would not be able to cycle to my fullest potential. So, I was content to enjoy the ride at a more leisurely pace. When we came to a highly technical stretch (“Rock Gardens”), I dismounted my bike and walked that particular section. In reality, a rider would have had to be very skilled to make it through the section regardless of what bike they were riding.

After getting through the rocky section, I returned to normal biking and encountered a very large rock drop. My bike shook and went down on impact. Before I could get the bike going forward again there was rock ledge with a 2-3 foot drop. I recall feeling the sensation of the drop and I remember hearing a grinding, snapping, and crunching noise. Also, for some unknown reason, I remember an awful smell. A white light hovered over my head and I remember thinking/saying “my leg is crooked, my leg is crooked!” I next remember laying on my side and attempting to straighten my lower leg.



***“I was in such pain  
and I remember  
thinking, just chop  
my leg off.”***

When I regained consciousness, a colleague from the bike group helped me sit up. I knew immediately something was wrong with my leg but it wasn't clear just where I was injured. My leg still felt as though it was crooked, although it was not. I remember experiencing intense pain in my ankle and my knee had quickly swollen and was huge.

The group leader asked if I was okay. I responded, with a quick “No.” I knew I was severely injured but didn't quite know where. The group leader advised that I could either walk up the mountain or I could pedal my bike back down. When I stood up, my whole leg felt loose from the thigh down. I was able to bear some weight but I knew I couldn't walk back down the mountain.

Somehow, I got back on the bike but I did not pedal with my left leg. Instead, I used the left pedal as a splint and used my right leg to pedal the bike. Some of the bike trail sections were still very technical and steep so I was forced to get off my bike and walk. The only way I could manage this was to use my bicycle as a crutch. I couldn't put any weight on my left leg. The trip down was arduous and very stressful. I was by myself except for the occasional colleague I met at different steps on the trail. I soon started to hyperventilate but I forced myself to concentrate and to breathe deeply in order to keep functioning. Slowly, ever so slowly and painfully, I made my way down the mountain.

When I reached the end of the trail, I propped myself up against one of the trucks until everyone and all the gear was loaded up. I was in such pain and I remember thinking, “Just chop my leg off.” I remember hearing and seeing that others in the group had also crashed. One colleague had ripped his bike shorts and was bleeding. Another colleague had damaged his mountain bike.

I was given a ride to the hospital. On route, I recall trying to distract myself by thinking, “I'll get back to Canada and my employer will take care of me.” While at the hospital, I was asked whether I hit my head and/or lost consciousness. I told them I honestly didn't know. I underwent X-rays and an immobilizer was placed on my left knee. I was discharged and returned to my hotel room. However, I was absolutely not feeling well.



Even with a full leg brace, I could hardly walk and I was in such awful pain. That night I was really sick and vomited. I don't remember falling asleep, but I must have. I woke up many times writhing in pain. It felt like my body was shaking from the inside. When I closed my eyes, it was as though I was right back at the crash scene. I could feel and hear my leg/knee/ankle being crushed, ripped and torn. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw myself crashing.

These feelings consumed my mind and I became afraid. I tried to remain calm. I got up and went to bathroom. I turned on all the lights, but I was still shaking from the inside out. At this point, I recall thinking how my situation was not good. I had never felt so physically ill before; it was so overwhelming. I took a shower in an

attempt to increase my comfort. While in the shower, I realized my leg was numb and I was also cold. I put on a lot of clothes in an attempt to warm myself.

Everything seemed to be racing. I tried to calm myself down by engaging in self-talk. I reassured myself by saying, "You can do this and it's okay." For the rest of the night I left the lights and television on. While I laid down, I didn't close my eyes. In the morning I woke up as usual but I am not sure how I managed to take a taxi to my class. I am not even sure how I went about writing my final exam! Certificates were given out and I was presented with a special award for significant efforts throughout the course. However, I graciously declined and gave the award to another member whom I thought was more deserving than myself. No one, including myself realized how severe my injury was.

I returned to the hotel for one more night in Portland before returning home. That night, I packed my bike and belongings. I called my family and informed them about what had

happened. My sister stated right there and then that I did not sound well and she was very concerned. That last night wasn't as bad; however, I still kept the lights and television on because my body did not want to fall asleep. Thankfully, on my way home, my air carrier provided me with a wheelchair and I received excellent care. They also expedited me through security checkpoints.

When I returned home, I realized my injuries were more than just physical; they were emotional and mental as well. Something was wrong. When I thought about the crash, I got really emotional and my chest got tight. The feelings and thoughts about the crash were constantly with me. I remember thinking "HELP!" I wanted the old Christa back. I saw a psychologist a few days later and I told her about the tight feeling in my chest and asked what was wrong with me. Her reply was that I was suffering from anxiety-PTSD. I recall replying, "That's terrible, but how do I get rid of it?"

One of the bicycle course colleagues was a Sergeant from my own office. When he returned home, he wrote the following about me: "The course was extremely challenging and the terrain the students faced was to the uppermost level of a cyclist's skills. Christa faced all these challenges without complaint. When an injury occurred, Christa continued to persevere and completed the day's activities."

I have come to realize that my bicycle accident is all part of my life journey. When I look back on the last few years, I feel very blessed and grateful. I don't like what happened to me but it did happen. I am left with both physical and mental symptoms that I must cope with on a daily basis. From the moment I regained consciousness, I knew that I was very injured physically and I fought hard to regain my life and spirit right from the start.

Yet, I did not realize that I had a brain injury as well. Sometimes I think that I should have known because I was feeling and acting so differently. I remember feeling so strange that I could not think rationally. I was too busy trying to survive. I couldn't keep thoughts of the crash out of my mind. It was like the crash was running through every ounce of my body. I tried to mask how I was feeling by being "tough" but inside I was screaming for relief. Simple tasks were difficult. Thoughts and emotions were always boiling over and exploding even as I kept trying to push them back down. Only when I felt "safe" did I share my true self and what was really going on inside of me. Whenever I spoke about the

crash, I actually felt like my body was once again crashing against the rocks. A good friend told me that she could see the fear in my eyes and face when I spoke about the accident.

Each of us is born a unique individual. We have a life path that starts even before we are born and this journey continues until we leave the earth. I am very grateful that I was injured at a time when Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Mild Traumatic Brain (MTB) Injuries had become well known and accepted as serious injuries. As a result, I have been able to find adequate help and support. However, I personally feel that there should be more awareness and education about the seriousness of a brain injury.

I share the following definition of PTSD as described by the Mayo Clinic. *PTSD is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event—either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.*

**“By the fall of 2015, I was totally exhausted. That’s because I fought so hard to appear to be healthier than I actually was.”**

My injuries were numerous, including injuries to my left knee, a small fracture of the femoral condyle, torn ankle ligaments, stretched leg tendons, compartment syndrome in my lower left leg, Mild Traumatic Brain Injury, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As you can imagine, I have had to attend numerous medical appointments but I have been fully engaged in my healing process.

These numerous combined symptoms affected me greatly. By the fall of 2015, I was totally exhausted. That’s because I fought so hard to appear to be healthier than I actually was. Yet, I had to learn that trying to be tough took way more effort than admitting I needed extra help. I had endured so much but always managed to pull myself back together, each time learning new coping techniques and/or fine tuning the ones I already used. My mind, body and soul had always worked together to keep myself well. But I had reached a breaking point; I knew I was not in a good space. I had to admit to myself and others that I needed more help. I started taking medication.



Being in excellent physical condition has always been very important to me. All through my youth and earlier adult life, I was an avid cyclist and marathon runner. I played hockey and participated in many more sports. Today, with all my injuries, I have needed patience because my life is so different. My lifestyle has changed drastically in so many ways. I have had to adapt my activities. But, it has been an incredible healing journey.

One of the tactics I have put in place to help with my healing is to make my home into a calming, relaxing, safe and positive place. I created a special relaxation area in my back yard. I've collected a number of therapeutic items - a water fountain, stones I've brought home during my nature walks, a traditional Aboriginal smudging area, incense, and an area for yoga, stretching and meditation. I also have several Tibetan singing bowls that make incredible sounds and vibrations.

My daughter's artwork is scattered throughout the house, positive affirmations abound, Himalayan salt lamps, plants to purify the air, and a diffuser with lavender essential oil in my bedroom to help me sleep. I have a bookshelf full of books related to trauma, the brain, meditation, massage, and spirituality. I am learning various trauma release techniques including different forms of massage, TRE-trauma release techniques, and Somatic Experiencing.

It is amazing how the brain and body change and adapt after trauma. I cook amazing meals, sit in silence for hours, enjoy piano music, and write about my journey. I really need and appreciate the support from my family and friends; they love me unconditionally. I often feel like the past years since the crash are an absolute blur.

As a result of my sustained and lasting injuries, I am no longer able to work as a police officer. I am a different person than I was prior to the crash. While I have adapted very well to the changes, I have certainly had periods of grieving both for the past as well as for the future in policing that I had always wanted. Taking time to grieve has become one of the most important steps of my healing from this trauma. Another step is to accept the way things are NOW.

## **PTSD Defined**

*PTSD is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event-either experiencing it or witnessing it.*

*Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.*

A life saver throughout my healing journey has been spending time in nature. Being in nature has such amazing calming, healing effects. It was here that I started to see the beauty of everything around me. I enjoy being barefoot as often as possible outside absorbing the earth's energy. I've captured some beautiful moments with my iPhone camera and I've started a new hobby called rock balancing.

After I shared with my father that I was leaving the police service on a medical discharge, he said, "Time for a new chapter. Exciting times. The unexpected happens for a reason. So proud of you for pouring your heart and soul into being the very best police officer. I would rather have your career end this way, rather than a flag folded and given to me."

Even though I have permanent injuries and my policing career is over, it is not the end for me, it is simply a new beginning. My healing process has been full of many challenges but all my experiences have created Post Traumatic Growth.

In other words, my major traumatic event has resulted in positive personal change. First and foremost, I realize that indeed, I am very resilient and strong!

## **Meet Christa Lessard**



*Christa J. Lessard, grew up at a small isolated lake in northern Saskatchewan, Canada. Her childhood was spent chopping wood, exploring nature, snowmobiling, and competing in sports.*

*She obtained a certificate in recreation and leisure management, participated in Canada World Youth exchange, worked at an adventure canoe company, in sports retail, at a ski resort, and raced in downhill mountain bike events across western Canada.*

*Christa is excited about entering a new chapter of her life. Her future plans include sharing her life experiences, her healing journey, her expertise and training. Her vision is to empower others especially those who continue to struggle from trauma related physical and mental health injuries.*

# THE BACK PAGE

| Final Words

We hope you've enjoyed this issue of TBI HOPE Magazine. Next month marks the two year anniversary of our publication. Last month, we introduced members of the TBI HOPE Network to our new mission statement:

***The Mission of TBI HOPE & INSPIRATION is to Advocate, Educate, and Serve all Affected by Brain Injury.***

Over the last two years, TBI HOPE Magazine has been read by tens of thousands of readers around the world. It has quickly filled the need for quality, meaningful information about brain injury. It has grown into something far bigger than my wife Sarah and I ever expected. We are grateful to be a small part of all this. But with this growth has come some challenges. And today, I am asking for your help.

There are costs associated with distributing a free publication. Over the last couple of years, we have personally covered all of the magazine operating expenses. From the monthly cost of our email service to hosting our site, free product give-aways, as well as other associated overhead, we have willingly and gladly covered it all. But the magazine is getting larger month-by-month.

Today, for the first time ever, I am asking that you consider donating to TBI HOPE. Donations, even small ones, will help us to offset the costs associated with TBI HOPE Magazine. We will ALWAYS be a free publication. That will never change. We've given a lot of thought to this request. At one point, we considered a crowdfunding program, but that didn't "feel" right. A simple request for your help seems, well, fitting.

We're not looking to change the world – well, maybe we are. But even a small \$12.00 donation equal to a dollar an issue will help. If you would like to support us and our mission, you can [Donate to TBI HOPE Here](#).

We have a special anniversary issue planned for next month as we celebrate both Brain Injury Awareness Month as well as our two-year publication birthday. Stay tuned!

Peace,

