

Brain Injury

July 2019

HOPE

supporting the
brain injury
community

MAGAZINE

OUR SURVIVOR SPOTLIGHT ISSUE

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Welcome

Publisher's Introduction

HOPE MAGAZINE

*Serving the Brain
Injury Community*

July 2019

Publisher

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Welcome to the July 2019 issue of HOPE Magazine

Over the years, it's been with much delight that Sarah and I have been able to bring you stories of real hope and heartfelt inspiration.

Our contributing writers have shared joys and hardships, victories and crushing defeats – but all have shown a resilience in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

In this issue, you will find a special *Survivor Spotlight* section. In this special section, we feature a story about a brain injury survivor who set her sights on Mount Everest. Another spotlighted survivor was able to complete schooling with a doctorate degree.

Every recovery is different. For many of us, success is defined by simply making it through the day, but you are sure to be uplifted by these stories of uncommon success after brain injury.

I hope you enjoy this month's issue of HOPE Magazine!



David A. Grant
Publisher

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Gaming My Way Back

By Shawn Hiers

Hi, my name is Shawn and I have a brain injury. Let's get the important stuff out of the way first before I get to my story. I am married with three kids. I am a veteran of the United States Military, and I consider myself an Uber Geek. Okay now that that's out of the way let's get to the meat of this story.

Three and a half years ago, I suffered a brain injury at work. Both feet gave out beneath me and my head smacked on the concrete. I suffered what is called a TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury). The tough part is that it took almost a year to diagnose me. At one point I had twelve doctors, specialists and therapists. It was a rough road.

In that one year, I had almost no money coming in since I was unable to do almost anything. Meanwhile, my wife was working three jobs in an effort to support our family which included a two-year-old and a seven-year-old. Also, during that year, I found out I had Lyme disease. I make the joke now that when I do things I do them right. So that's the medical history in a really small nutshell. Let's get to my gaming history or, as I am calling this, the fun part.

I still remember the Christmas day in the '80's when my family got an Atari. I can still remember playing Pac-Man and Pitfall and, luckily, the Star Wars games a little later. So I have been playing for a while.

🕹️ At one point I had twelve doctors, specialists and therapists. It was a rough road.

I remember getting a Tandy (remember that thing?) from Radio Shack as my first foray into PC gaming and I owned most of the consoles of legends - my favorite is probably the Super Nintendo, with the Sega CD as a close second.

The first day I saw the PS One I was on board my ship in the Navy and a shipmate who got one was playing Resident Evil. It was funny to see ten Navy guys scream when the zombie dog attacked. It was that day I was hooked on the PlayStation brand.

Let's get to present day for a few minutes. I am doing much better. I was a stay at home father with my three girls. We decided to have another after year one of my brain injury and she is kind of our miracle child. I have only three doctors and specialists now, so that's good. I am also writing for PS Nation, which is a completely new skill set for me.

I am still playing games and I am currently geeking out over Galak-Z. So now I am to the point where I am ready to start trying to help people by sharing my story and experiences. I guess it's time to get to the point of this story.

The first year was really hard and I almost died. I almost committed suicide. As you know, the brain controls everything in your body. Let's call it the CPU. With my brain injury I have trouble with reading comprehension, short term memory loss, anger management and attention issues.

Along with that, I began my trouble with mental illness. I never had issues with depression, anxiety or suicidal ideation before my injury. I do now. That's been hard. It was like a thousand ton weight dropped on me and it still feels like that at times.

**“With my brain injury
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Where do video games come in? There is ongoing research that video games can be beneficial in rehabbing a person's brain. I won't bore you here with the research by listing all the benefits. Instead I'll tell you about my experiences. Before the accident I was pretty good at games. I had no trouble with first-person shooters or adventure games. I could read reams of text in role playing games. After the accident I had trouble with all these things.



I used to play Rock Band Blitz with my wife, and I'd beat the heck out of her when we passed the controller back and forth before. Suddenly, she was king. Gaming at that time was really hard and depressing. Then I found Star Trek Online (STO).

I have been playing STO since launch but stopped playing for over a year. I was able to play at my own pace. There was no reading necessary, I knew the game well, and it was fairly easy. It was there I found people that I still call friends

today and members of this group were disabled like me. I played every day, for at least three hours a day, for a year. It was structured. I had a schedule of things to do and skills to use from an easy to pick from tray. After a while I found that things that I couldn't do well earlier gradually became easier. After a while, I moved on to what I call different cycles.

One genre that changed for me is puzzle/adventure games, namely the LEGO games. I did not have the patience before the injury and now I cannot get enough of them. Of the five LEGO games available for the PS4, I have a 100% score in four of them. They make me happy and it is always a good day when a new one comes out. As an aside, I have become an avid collector of real life LEGO sets. I will be buying almost everything for LEGO Dimensions.

A bad side effect of the brain injury is that it takes a toll on my body. I had an existing condition that worsened so badly because of stress that I had major stomach surgery. The plus to that story is that in the two weeks I could not get off the couch, I got 100% in LEGO Marvel Superheroes!

Going into year's two to three, I have had several hospital stays. Two of them were for mental illness related issues. By my second stay in the hospital, I finally found the advice I needed to turn the corner. Gaming was still part of my life as I turned back to my PlayStation, more now since I had a better control over my injury. So I turned to first-person shooters for a little challenge.

In January of this year I bought Destiny. Remember when I first said I couldn't play shooters? I was nuts to try. But you know what? Destiny is so good that I have a Level 32 character. The game will get to me after an hour or two, which is plenty of time to get most of my bounties in and what not.

While I am not at my twitchy best like days of yore, I can hold my own in a Strike or two.

I was going to write about my experiences writing as well, but that story is not over yet. I have to leave something for years four through six. What I am basically saying is that it is difficult, no matter what you are going through. But it will get better with time and effort and a lot of really hard work.

None of this was ever easy, but it was so worth it at all times.

None of this was ever easy, but it was so worth it at all times. Find something to help you get through. Hopefully that something will help you rehab whatever your problem is. I am proof that it does, and I am willing to bet there are thousands of people that will agree with me.

Lastly, I would be remiss not to take the time to thank my family. If it was not for them, I would probably not be here. I owe them everything, so thanks guys. It will never be forgotten.



Meet Shawn Hiers

Shawn is a disabled gamer and a married father of four. He has been an avid gamer since the Atari days. Shawn has a passion for all things Lego and is an avid Toy Collector. He is also a huge Doctor Who fan and can talk about All Things Who for hours!

Editor's note: Shawn's article has been reprinted with permission of PSNation.com

**Sometimes I am okay with
the way my life is today.
Other times, I really wish it
didn't turn out like this.**

Life After Brain Injury - it's Complicated



Survivor Spotlight

Conquering Everest

By Meghan Young



This is my Mama, beaming with a heady mix of pride, oxygen deprivation, and exhaustion after reaching Annapurna Base Camp (4130 meters) in the Himalayas of Nepal.

It's a proud accomplishment for anyone, but it holds extra special meaning for us. A year and a half ago her life was almost taken by a bizarre accident. She was walking down some stone steps in Italy when she fell, leaving her with multiple skull fractures, subdural hematomas, cerebral air edema, a torn biceps tendon, broken clavicle and scapula, torn rotator cuff, and a severe TBI. In the months since then, she's had multiple surgeries and procedures and began the intense process of healing physically and emotionally from the experience. It's been brutal, but my Mom is one of the toughest women I know.

This trek forced her to confront some of her very understandable fears: of falling, of stone stairs (of which there were thousands), and more. She had to ignore the voices of doubt and negativity from

unbelievers and well-intentioned folks at home, and gather her courage every morning to face the new day. And she did it. Every single step under her own power, often with a smile or song on her lips to boot. To say I'm proud of her is an understatement. Watching her commit to wonder and curiosity over fear each day is something I'll never forget. I aspire to carry that same spirit into the rest of my life and I'll never forget this amazing, hard, hot, sweaty adventure.

Meet Meghan Young



Meghan is a Seattle-based photographer and writer with a focus on stories centered around outdoor adventure, human-powered travel, and the deep connections inspired by wild places in cultures across the globe. When she's not on assignment, you can find her dabbling in watercolors, writing haikus, and attempting to snuggle every puppy she meets.

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Survivor Spotlight

Playing for the Love of Football

By Michael Lopez



After my son Christian's traumatic brain injury at age five, we could not have expected his unbelievable success as a Special Olympics soccer player. After his injury, we worked as a team during the recovery process.

We did rehab and scouted different sports and at last chose football (soccer). Today my son is 25 years old. He was the captain on his Special Olympics Unified Football team. The brain damage he suffered has never been an obstacle to achieving his goals.

He was an active member of the SER de Puerto Rico, Luis Salazar Foundation and an outstanding special education student. Among other initiatives, he was spokesperson and young symbol for Puerto Rico's United Way's public service campaign. He holds the Eagle Scout rank since 2010, the highest rank attainable in the Boy Scouts.

Christian expects to study visual arts in college this August 2019. Also, he wishes not only to be part of his university's soccer team and be an outstanding player in the Special Olympics Puerto Rico, but to help kids with disabilities play for the love of football.

Article Submitted by Christian's father Michael Lopez.

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Artist & Survivor Emily Hayes

Survivor Spotlight **Healing Through Art**

By Rosalie Johnson

Editor's Note: When brain injury survivor Rosalie Johnson had the opportunity to interview fellow brain injury survivor Emily Hayes, she jumped at the chance, making this piece a double Survivor Spotlight. Enjoy!

Yan was the name of a child in a Chinese orphanage. At two-and-a-half years old, she was adopted by her new family, moved to America and “Emily” was added to her name. In her new home, Emily had two older sisters who were like second mothers to her. When she was about four years of age, her first nephew was born. He was

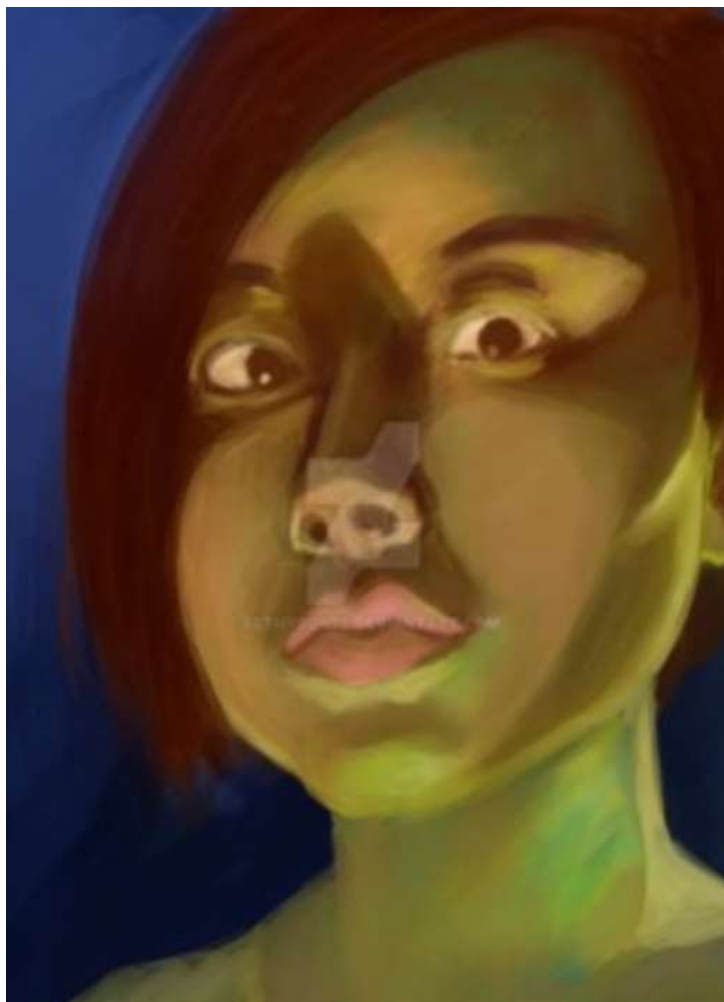
eventually followed by a second nephew. “My nephews were more like my brothers.” Emily explained.

Anime and Manga programs, comics, and games were some of the earliest and most influential in developing Emily’s passion in art and graphic design. Anime is an animation style originating in Japan. Manga is Japanese for whimsical images or comics. It is a mixture of Japanese and western styles of drawing. This art form would later become instrumental in her recovery from Anti-NMDAR Encephalitis.

Emily also had a passion for music while growing up. She learned to play the piano and guitar but not as well as the clarinet. She played the clarinet in her high school marching band and she was selected to play in the school’s jazz band which was a smaller percussion ensemble. She sang in the high school choir and auditioned for and was chosen to sing in the after-school select choir.

Growing up she loved art, but music was her true passion. While attending Plymouth State University, Emily changed her major four or five times. Art Education had too much writing and she didn’t like graphic design. During her senior year she settled into Studio Art as a major with a minor in Art History and she graduated from Plymouth University in May of 2017.

The summer following graduation Emily worked two jobs while focusing on her art. She was able to display her work at Dover Art Walk-In, a studio located in the Washington Mills in Dover, New Hampshire. On December 15, 2017, Emily moved into an apartment and her plan was to focus on her art and the art walks. During the two weeks in her new home she mostly slept and, as she was told,



she acted weird. Her last day at work, along with the last days of her memories, was December 28, 2017.

Emily was diagnosed with Anti-NMDAR Encephalitis, which is an auto-immune disease where the immune system essentially attacks the brain. It is a disease that affects young women more often than men. Emily woke up in the middle of March. She had no memory from her month in a coma or of the two months she was in rehabilitation. Emily adds, “I lost three months. For two months I was functional and didn’t know it. I missed my twenty-third birthday while in a coma.”

“Speech therapy was the most difficult and took the most time during cognitive rehabilitation. I know that I am getting better as I am thinking more clearly. I no longer need supervision. To be seizure-free for one year will be a milestone. I will be able to drive again and regain my independence. I am fortunate that I have a very good support system.”

Emily attended The Krempels Center in Portsmouth and the people there helped to re-introduce her to her love of music and art. As she explains, “The Music Matters group has really helped my musical creativity. I was able to play my clarinet in the Community Band last summer. I am even learning to play the ukulele, in fact I received one for Christmas!” The “She Shed” program at The Krempels Center helps Emily to work on personal struggles and achievement with other women.

In Art Expression, group programs work on different aspects of creativity. The “River of Life” project helps to demonstrate the ebbs and flows of life. “My ‘River of Self’ piece demonstrates me starting and graduating from college. The dam in the flow represents my illness and me at a standstill before starting back in life. There are several paths I can choose to follow. I hope to build up my art to be able to become re-involved with the Art Walk. I am working on my art at Krempels Center. I still need a push in this time and space. It feels easy to be stuck, to fall into that depression; but I am getting out more to keep myself motivated,” she explains.

Emily has recently been working on smaller art pieces with an online community devoted to drawing and art. She is able to interact with others who have similar interests which encourages her to draw more. She likes the positive responses from the community and finds their feedback very helpful.

Game designer and art therapist are fields that Emily is looking to possibly pursue for her future. She strongly feels that, "Music and art are the biggest way to change the world one person at a time. Saving one person at a time is saving their world. Music and art don't get enough credit in recovery."



Meet Rosalie Johnson

Before her Traumatic Brain Injury, Rosalie Johnson was a Registered Nurse and loved volunteering for various non-profit organizations. She was able to travel, and live and work throughout the country with her husband, Randy and their ever changing family of dogs.

These days Rosalie can be found running the Seacoast Brain Injury Support Group and volunteering at Krempels Center in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. She is a nine-year Board Member for the Brain Injury Association of New Hampshire, author of "Meet the Artist" article printed quarterly in HEADWAY Newsletter published by BIANH. If you can't find her, she is probably on the road traveling in her motorhome!

Living With Hope

By Patrick Brigham





Survivor Spotlight **Finishing my** **Doctorate**

By Dr. Sherrill Waddell

I was in an automobile accident that resulted in mild traumatic brain injury and spinal damage. Like everyone else going through this instant and drastic lifestyle change, I work on getting to know the new me every day. There are so many aspects of my injuries that I deal with as I adjust to a new normal way of life. I experienced a significant amount of loss during this change; the loss of my old self, a divorce from an unhappy marriage, a home and lifestyle I adored, and was let go from a job that never felt like work.

While I was grieving the loss of so many components that made up my identity, I was also clinging onto some of my dreams from the ‘former me’ and finish what I started with regard

to my education. With so much change in a short period of time, I could not give up the goal of earning a doctorate. People, things, homes and jobs can be lost, but education, along with knowledge and understanding, becomes part of who we are no matter what we experience throughout life.

Those thrust into an undesired change such as this understand the utter devastation and confusion that comes from being one person that took time, effort, and a lifetime of choices to create and in an instant placed into the broken body and shattered mind of someone completely different. In the beginning, I felt like I was always chasing the ghost of who I once was. I truly thought if I worked hard enough in my therapies, I would be able to go back to who I was. I had goals and dreams and a lifetime of plans laid out ahead of me. Then, I was in this accident and all of my passions and heart’s desires were replaced with just trying to survive and adjusting in the brokenness and confusion of who I now was. My dreams, hopes, and aspirations had been replaced with nightmares, fear, and pain.

“If a person has never met me, it might take time to figure out that I have a brain injury.”

If a person has never met me, it might take time to figure out that I have a brain injury. In my case, TBI is an invisible disability, it’s not noticeable at first glance. It takes a while to see the struggles I face. With this hidden aspect of it, I have heard all the usual ignorant comments such as, ‘I have pain

“Though my input and output are different than they once were, I feel as though my intellect has not changed and is still intact.”

too, but I can't just sit around and do nothing,' and 'you look okay.' There was a time when I absorbed these hurtful comments. I have stopped trying to explain myself. With each passing day I am more compassionate towards the person I have become. I now know that a person understands from their own level of perception and it takes a great deal of patience, time, education, and understanding for someone to truly fathom what it's like to have traumatic brain injury.

The people around me had to adjust to the new person I was becoming. I was no longer the mother, wife, daughter, friend or coworker they once knew. I was damaged and in constant pain. My life had been consumed with trying to figure how to bridge the chasm of the old me and the stranger I had become.

The effect of the accident is visible to those who knew me before. My whole-body composure, speech, gait, gaze is now different. I react differently, I laugh and cry uncontrollably. I stumble. I bump into things. I throw objects. I am more impulsive. My processing is much slower. I forget things. I wake up hurting and go to sleep in pain every day. Before I was more restrained with keeping my thoughts guarded, I have acquiesced to the fact that my thoughts now become words without my consent. Though my input and output are different than they once were, I feel as though my intellect has not changed and is still intact.

I had several people tell me to forget about my education and just focus on getting better. I could not do it. I wanted to hold onto one of my dreams prior to living my life with TBI. I had decided no matter what, I was going to do everything I could to try to finish my doctorate, even though I couldn't read. I was diligent in my recovery and went to multiple therapies for years. I recovered from spinal and other surgeries and a deadly infection. I went to dozens of doctors and hundreds of appointments.

Working towards finishing school was my escape from the medical world I now lived in and helped me get through the painful process of recovery. I had spent decades getting to where I was in my career and in my education. I was a manager at my job and was working on completing my doctorate, only needing one class and a completed dissertation to finish. I had started my study and was using my job to collect data for the research I was conducting.

Then, in an instant, I couldn't read or understand what the words were communicating. I looked at my dissertation and everything contained in it was now foreign to me. After taking a year-long medical leave from school, I began to work on my dissertation. I used a guide to help me read each line. I read a line at a time and then a paragraph and tried to process what I had written. I learned to chunk information.

By the time I was able to read and understand what my paper was about, I had come to the realization that the population contained in the study would no longer be accessible to me. I had to make the decision to start over. I had an accepted concept paper from the committee that was no longer relevant and had to completely start from scratch. It was difficult to delete the pages I had worked so hard on.

I had the daunting task of trying to figure out what I could study. It was exhausting, I could read and write for about a half hour and then needed a break. A few hours later I would go back to work on my research. It took several hundred hours and a total of four years for me to finish my dissertation. There were ups and downs along with frustration and confusion all along the way. The one thing that I would never allow to enter my mind was doubt in my ability to finish. In December of 2017, my dissertation on Examining the Relationship between Virtual School Size and Student Achievement was approved.



In June the following year, with titanium in my spine and traumatic brain injury, tears coming down and a huge smile across my face, I walked across the stage and graduated with a doctorate in Instructional Technology and Distance Education.

Having a goal gave me a purpose. Working towards something important to me showed me that I was just evolving with a different framework of body and mind than I was used to having. I embraced the challenge. It helped me realize that I have something to contribute. Achieving this goal has shown me that no matter the obstacles ahead, I will not give up on this beautiful life that I still have and will continually strive to reach a higher level knowing and understanding.

The chancellor of the school I attended shared my story during graduation and asked me to stand while the entire audience applauded. Even with the noise from the entire crowd, I heard my family congratulating me with shouts of praise. It is a humble moment of my life that I will always hold dear to my heart.

Meet Dr. Sherrill Waddell



Dr. Sherrill Waddell is a traumatic brain injury survivor, an adventurer, mother, sister, aunt, and friend. She was the manager of an online school and aspiring to become a professor and principal at the time of her automobile accident. She had worked in education since she was a teenager and completed her associate's, bachelor's, and master's degree when tragedy struck. She only needed one class and a completed dissertation to graduate. It took four years of recovery and hard work to finish her last degree, a doctorate.

She currently lives in Florida and enjoys long walks in nature, reading, writing, and spending time with her animals and her family and friends. She also enjoys traveling to National Parks all over the world and is working on writing a book about her experiences in these wild spaces.

She is working on sharing her journey to recovery and seeing how she can help those going through this incredibly difficult challenge.

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Brain Injury is
The Last Thing You Think About

UNTIL

It's The ONLY THING You Think About.





Finding Support

By Debra Gorman

I recently spent some time in my hometown, several states away from where I currently live, to attend my stepsister's graveside funeral service. She died in January of this year at only fifty-six years of age. Both her legs had been amputated over a period of time. Toward the end of her life we communicated regularly. I marveled at the peace she exuded, as well as her courage and positivity. I wondered if she ever felt isolated and alone. What kind, if any, emotional and spiritual support did she receive? She had a rare blood disorder, it's unlikely she ever met anyone with her set of troubles.

When I experienced a brain hemorrhage in 2011, I longed to know someone who could really understand me. I felt cut off from the world and terribly sad. I spent months looking for a support group, online or otherwise. I did attend several meetings with a local support group for brain injured persons but received an eye-opening revelation: I didn't necessarily have it so bad.

"I felt cut off from the world and terribly sad. I spent months looking for a support group, online or otherwise."

Most of the people in the group seemed much worse off than me. It wasn't a good fit. I was in a quandary. I didn't like the person I had become. I felt ugly and awkward. Prior to the brain bleed I felt accomplished but self-conscious. I was strong, athletic and had many abilities and hobbies, even though anxiety had always been part of my life.

Around my second year post brain injury, I experienced a game-changer. In one of my many online searches for hope, I came across an article written by David A. Grant. I wept with relief. Here was someone who also suffered from a brain injury. As I read, I thought he could have been describing me. He also struggled to accept the change in his body and life. Suddenly, I felt less alone. I did a search and found other articles he'd written about his current state of affairs. Each article I read felt like a life-giving glass of water to a withered soul.

Then, we moved to another state. There are no brain injury support groups in our area. I had started a blog years before, but my writing took a turn. Now in my blog, I tend to focus on the commonality of suffering. I finally understand that no two brain injuries are the same.

I am unlikely to find anyone with my exact set of issues. I have also found that reading the writing of others has provided much needed comfort. Instead of looking for a soul sister, I look for a soul's truth. I believe that age, along with its limitations and humility, can bring wisdom and clarity. The more wisdom we gain, the more suffering has the ability to temper Adversity as part of life's journey. I know it's cliché, but we can choose to be bitter or better. It's all about choice.

Along the way I have discovered a benefit of brain injury. Or, maybe it's age—those two things happened almost simultaneously for me. Just tonight I asked my husband if he remembered how insecure I was earlier in our relationship. He did. In hindsight, I understand why. In one year, I had begun a new, stressful, career, left a bad marriage and dealt with the fallout, moved to a new town and fell in love. That's a lot of change in a short amount of time.

“I am unlikely to find anyone with my exact set of issues. I have also found that reading the writing of others has provided much needed comfort.”

How is it that now I am the most confident I have ever been? I haven't "arrived" by any means. I don't think I'll recognize that place when I get there. However, I accept that I'm worthy of love and respect and all that entails. I care about people and feel much more compassion and empathy than before my brain injury. I enjoy the love of my family. I am a hard worker. I'm also a work in progress. I accept that too. After what has happened to me, I believe I can endure just about anything.

It has now been nearly eight years since my brain bled. Sometimes I actually feel acceptance of my new life. At other times it still hurts a great deal. I must acknowledge, however, that with the passage of time it gets easier. I write all this down to encourage all of us to cut ourselves some slack. However it may look to others, I believe each one of us is doing our best to navigate this life at any given moment. We can each learn to do better, and when we are able to do better, we will.

Meet Debra Gorman



Debra Gorman was fifty-six years old in 2011 when she experienced a cavernous angioma on her brain stem, causing her brain to bleed. Four months later she sustained a subdural hematoma. She later learned that she also had suffered a stroke during one of those events.

At the time of the injuries, Debra was just becoming established in her new career as a Registered Nurse. She had been married only six years to her beloved.

In the blink of an eye life became very different. She lacks the balance and coordination to do any of those activities. What Debra does have she considers priceless, the love and support of her husband, children and friends.

She finds a creative outlet in writing. She enjoys writing for her children and grandchildren and has written articles that have been published for hospice, local newspapers, and Hope magazine. Currently, she writes for her blog, entitled Graceful Journey. debralynn48.wordpress.com

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PTSD & EMDR

By David A. Grant

When I was run down by a sixteen-year-old driver back in 2010, I never expected how deeply my life would be forever changed. To the core of my very being, I am forever different.

While many people get their education in classrooms or in front of monitors, mine has come from the school of hard knocks. Life has given me on-the-job experience in fields I never intended to study.

In the 3,115 days since my life was forever altered, I've become an expert in two most unexpected topics: Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. While never classroom trained and being only a layperson within the field, living for 4.5 million minutes with both a TBI and PTSD equates to a lot of real-world experience.

Today I want to share my experiences with PTSD. It's a long story so, grab a cup of whatever you are drinking and, let's talk.

"In the 3,115 days since my life was forever altered, I've become an expert in two most unexpected topics: Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder."

While TBI can ruin most any day, PTSD is downright cruel. For the first year after my accident, I would wake fifteen, sometimes twenty, nights a month weeping, yelling, thrashing, sweat-covered from the most horrific nightmares you can imagine. A "good" bad night meant one terror-filled



episode. A “bad” bad night meant waking up from one horror-filled scene, doing my best to pull myself together, only to fall asleep into another nightmare.

It was not a life – it was sheer survival. Sarah and I walked around for many years in extreme sleep debt, dark circles under our eyes. Suicidal ideation was ever-present. If you lived the type of misery that defined my life, you would most likely consider an exit strategy as well.

I need to really hammer home how difficult this was. This was not just a short chapter following an accident. This went on for many, many years. Even on the nights without terrors, I was up two, three, sometimes four times a night. A block of sleep that measured two hours was a rarity indeed.

For years, I errantly thought that most of my struggles were TBI related, with a splash of PTSD added to make life... interesting. Over the last couple of months, I learned that this was wrong. My PTSD and accompanying sleep challenges were causing more problems than I ever considered, but we’ll get to that soon enough.

Never one to suffer needlessly, and certainly not one to play the victim, I sought professional help. I could fill a book about the pathetic experiences that I’ve had within the professional community. If I sound harsh, it’s because I laid my trust in others who seemed more interested in my insurance coverage than my well-being.

There was that doctor early-on who said that I would be “completely recovered” within 12-18 months. He walked back that comment a bit later, telling Sarah and me that it would most likely be five years until I was “normal” again. That was our last meeting with that doctor.

“Don’t forget to pay the receptionist on your way out!”

“I would start every day with my own personal gas gauge well under empty and struggle just to get through another day.”

Let's not forget the next PTSD professional I saw. As the common thread in my nightmares was my imminent death, he suggested that I mentally “arm myself” before I went to sleep. Always willing to go to any lengths, I followed his advice. That very night, in my sleep, as I was being attacked by armed terrorists, I pulled out some type of really big gun (I'm not a gun person, so I can only call it a really big gun). I proceeded to slaughter the cast of characters in that nightmare-scape. It was a most horrific bloodbath.

That was my first and last visit to that particular “professional.”

Still, the nightmares continued. I have died every way imaginable and in ways unimaginable. “How so?” asked someone in the third row.

How about drowning, burning to death, falling off cliffs, falling into space, being shot, beaten to death on countless occasions, burning to death again, a few more drownings, and the worst of the worst – being in the presence of some type of evil, unspeakably powerful supernatural entity whose intent was to have me suffer unmercifully until it killed me.

These were the best of times and the worst of times.

Wait a minute, there was no “best.” It was one never-ending bag of suck. I would start every day with my own personal gas gauge well under empty and struggle just to get through another day. I was not living; I was merely existing. It was horrible.

Several years ago, in absolute PTSD desperation, I sought out professional help again. Throwing a dart at the calendar it would have landed six, maybe seven, years post-accident.

My step-son had a great experience with a neurologist – a neurologist who also claimed expertise in brain injury. How excited we were, heading to see a new specialist. We had hope.

“I can fix you,” he proclaimed after our intake appointment. Can you feel the excitement building? We were at a low point, desperate, and in deep and troubled waters.

His next comment will forever be part of our narrative. “You do NOT have PTSD at all, you have sleep apnea.”

This left us both scratching our heads, but he was, after all, the brain injury “expert.”

He went on to say that my night terrors were caused by lack of oxygen. Fix the apnea and the terrors would disappear. It sure sounded appealing. Fast forward through the next three months as I wore a CPAP machine through countless nightmares. And so ended my experience with that doctor.

By this time, we were resigned to the fact that this was just the way life would be forever. Multiple times reaching out for help brought multiple disappointments. It was devastating but, being who we are, we did the best we could.

“By this time, we were resigned to the fact that this was just the way life would be forever.”

The years continued to pass. There were good nights and bad. At one point I went for a couple of weeks without a single nightmare, yet my PTSD remained alive and well. My eyes would fill with tears at every passing ambulance. Passing a motor vehicle accident scene while driving was perhaps my biggest trigger. My whole body would shake and for the remainder of that day, I would be effectively useless.

How sad a story this would be if this was the way life was destined to be until the end.

When I write, I often don’t know where I am going with an article. Today I had no intent to delve as deeply into what life was like when I suffered with PTSD, but it’s really important that you get a good feel for some of the challenges that we’ve walked through over the years. I say “we” as this is as much Sarah’s journey as it is mine. She’s been there, by my side, through the last 3,115 days since the accident. It was her presence in my life that stayed my hand from near-certain self-harm. I love her too much to leave her with that type of legacy. No way, no how.

“Hey David, can you fast forward to the happy ending part?” There goes that guy in the third row again.

Let’s do it!

Back in September of last year, my mom had a stroke. I spent my 57th birthday in an ER, mom’s fate hanging by a thread. It was the most stress I had experienced in years, and with that stress came a full-blown resurgence of PTSD.

For months, life was again defined by multiple horrific nights prompting me to tell Sarah that it felt like year one all over again. Though I despised my PTSD, time showed that I could live with it, albeit difficult.

A couple of months ago, in absolute and utter desperation, I again sought professional help. Life had become unsustainable. The dying will do what the living will not. I jumped to the internet and searched for “PTSD doctor near me.” That one search has forever changed my life.

A week later found me in the office of a true and legitimate PTSD specialist. During our intake interview, as I shared my eight+ years of history, he nodded, took notes, nodded some more, and took more notes.

He shared that treatment would involve Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, also called EMDR. At that point I was only vaguely familiar with the concept, having done just a bit of research prior to that first visit.

In the spirit of 100% transparency, I was skeptical. C'mon, how could I not be, given my history? But I was a willing skeptic and made the very conscious decision to be open to trying, and let the results be the true gauge of success.

“There was an immediate relief from my more glaring challenges. Almost overnight the nightmares ceased.”

I will spare you the details of how the process worked, other than to say that watching lights move left and right, while holding buzzers in my hands initially felt a bit silly. But the results quickly made me a convert. The core premise is that trauma memories fail to get processed, and it is those unprocessed memories that cause PTSD. Effectively process the trauma memories and the PTSD becomes manageable.

There was an immediate relief from my more glaring challenges. Almost overnight the nightmares ceased. That alone would have been a good reason for happy jumping-jacks. But it got even better. A passing ambulance produced no anxiety.

"But wait, there's more!" Said the channeled voice of Billy Mays.

Crowds, heretofore avoided, no longer bothered me. In social gatherings, I no longer felt compelled to sit by a wall or near a door - mindful of escape. My overall sense of well-being has shifted quicker than our climate. I "feel" better than I have in many, many years.

Over the last couple of months, I had one minor setback and my expectations are such that I fully understand that I am not cured of PTSD. It's just that the volume has been turned down dramatically.

Oh, the joys of restful sleep. Prior to EMDR, I had one night of "through the night sleep," in over eight years. Let that sink in for a minute. Over eight years of sleep debt. Over the last couple of

months, I have learned that many of what I thought were TBI challenges were actually PTSD symptoms. While I know quite a bit about all of this, I am still learning.

Yesterday, I let my doctor know that our sessions would be coming to a close. At the outset, he predicted one-to-two months of EMDR therapy. He was spot on.

It's hard not to be excited about this new chapter. In the span of eight short weeks, everything has changed.

Lest I need to remind anyone, I still have a brain injury. Just a couple days ago, I had a "tough TBI day." If you are nodding now, you get it.

Life is all about moving forward. I will continue to live mindfully. My PTSD is well-controlled for now, something I never thought possible. I am sleeping like a baby. No more 2:00 AM waking up, head racing with thoughts. No more nightmares. It's stunningly wonderful, and close to unbelievable.

Everyone has a different path in life. Odd as it sounds, I'm grateful for the path that my life has taken. I can see the reflection of how proficient, kind and caring my new doctor is by simply looking at my past experiences. I am not embittered nor upset. That is part of my past. Today life is okay. Compared to where I've come from, okay is just about perfect.

"In the span of eight short weeks, everything has changed."



Meet David A. Grant

David A. Grant is a freelance writer based out of southern New Hampshire and the publisher of HOPE Magazine. He is the author of Metamorphosis, Surviving Brain Injury.

He is also a contributing author to Chicken Soup for the Soul, Recovering from Traumatic Brain Injuries. David is a BIANH Board Member. David is a regular contributing writer to Brainline.org, a PBS sponsored website.

News & Views

Survivors are capable of pretty remarkable things. Not all of us have a trip to the Mount Everest base camp in our DNA, but a victory is a victory – whether great or seemingly small. Very real courage is demonstrated by survivors worldwide who get up and say, “Today I’ll give it another try.”

When I was younger, I had dreams and aspirations. At one point, I contemplated becoming an architect. Those close to me know that I like to create things. As one of our info-graphics this month shared, *“Brain injury is the last thing you think about until it’s the only thing you think about.”* Living as a member of the brain injury community was never part of my plan – but so often the Universe giggles when we make plans, as if to say, “good luck with that!”



So it is for us, and so it is for you. We have found that the key to being reasonably happy is to play well the hand that fate dealt to us. As we close in on nine years since “that day” that changed both of our lives forever, we are doing reasonably well, though we both marvel at the truly epic timeline of brain injury recovery.

Wherever you are in your journey, it is our sincere hope that we’ve been able to cast a light upon the path that you are walking, and that at some point as you read through this issue, even if for a moment, you realized that you are not walking alone.

Peace,

David & Sarah