

BRAIN INJURY

Spring 2023

HOPE

MAGAZINE

SERVING ALL AFFECTED BY BRAIN INJURY

**Our Eight Year
ANNIVERSARY ISSUE**

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Welcome

Publisher's Introduction

HOPE MAGAZINE

*Serving the Brain
Injury Community*

Fall 2022

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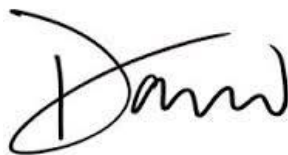
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Welcome to the Spring 2023 Issue of HOPE Magazine

Most of us who have experienced life after brain injury, either as survivors or family members, know that this is Brain Injury Awareness Month. While it's great that an entire month is dedicated to advocacy and awareness, there are eleven other months during which each of us can choose to advocate. You can never start too early to advocate, as one of our youngest contributors, eleven-year-old Tommy Naudy, shares in our lead article. Tommy is a veritable advocacy rock star, wise beyond his years.

For those of us living with brain injuries, we are acutely aware that we live every day of every month with what is often an unseen disability. The vast majority of our readership consists of brain injury survivors. It is to you that we dedicate this month's issue. You are the rock stars of our community, suiting up and showing up for a life you never planned on living. You are stronger than you know and braver than you might think.

I wish you peace on your journey.



David A. Grant
Publisher

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*"Hope is being able to see that there
is light despite all of the darkness"*

-Desmond Tutu

Spring 2023



Advocacy

Education

Inspiration



Inspired by My Mom

By Tommy Naudy



Take a deep breath, count one, two, three. A person with a TBI will never be able to change. That is one of the hardest parts of having a Traumatic Brain Injury. The brain is a very complex organ that controls all the processes that control your body. Your motor skills, vision, breathing, temperature, thoughts, memory, and emotions. Together your brain and your spinal cord make up your entire central nervous system.

A person that acquired a brain injury struggles every day, and nobody will ever be able to understand them unless you walk in their shoes. It's very easy to judge and say to them, "Why can't you control yourself? Why do you have to yell? Why are you in a bad mood? Why are you so tired? Why do you always seem miserable?" The answer to all these questions is that they can't change. If it's hard for a caretaker, a friend, or a family member to understand them, then who can they go to?

"I have experience dealing with my mom for many years, and it's not easy dealing with a person with a brain injury. I know very well that she will never be able to change."

Some days may be easier than others. Not every day is going to be the same for a person with a brain injury. There might be days when they get more sleep, so they feel more rested, less confused, have more energy, feel happier, less agitated, and aggressive.

I have experience dealing with my mom for many years, and it's not easy dealing with a person with a brain injury. I know very well that she will never be able to change. And as I got older, I realized that I'm the one that can help her. I'm not the one with the brain injury. I have to learn how to be better for her. A lot of people are very judgmental and might think that a person is just doing it to be mean or rude and they can change. A person that has a TBI will never change, and the people around them are the ones that have to make the adjustments so the person with the TBI can feel comfortable and have a better life.

It's devastating for them to live with this. It makes it even harder if the people that surround them are not supportive and understanding. A person with a TBI can be completely fine and then all of a sudden have an emotional breakdown. Their emotions are like a light switch. The brain sends signals that are electrical or chemical to our bodies. Having a TBI can cause a disruption to the signals, causing our bodies to misinterpret information.

After a brain injury, the brain forms neural pathways called neuroplasticity. This process allows damaged portions of the brain to take control by having to rewire to function in a different way than they used to before the brain injury. The brain has been studied for years, making it the most complex organ.

To this day, scientists have not been able to discover all the great things that the brain is capable of doing. The cerebral cortex is the portion of the brain that is mostly impacted by a traumatic brain injury. Having a moderate to severe TBI can have a long-lasting or permanent effect. Even though a person might go through rehabilitation, they will still face lifetime challenges. The more knowledgeable we become about Traumatic Brain Injuries, the more we can help them with their daily struggles.

Meet Tommy Naudy

"My name is Tommy, and I'm eleven years old. I'm currently in sixth grade. I spend most of my time studying, and since I was little, my passion has been medicine and learning about the human body. I always knew I wanted to be a doctor since I was a little boy. My dream is to get into an Ivy League university to become a neurosurgeon. I love to learn about the brain. The brain is such a complex organ in the human body that not even scientists understand it completely.

I also want to become an advocate for people who have suffered Traumatic Brain Injuries. They inspire me with how strong they are despite all the challenges they have to face. I love boxing and spending time with my little brothers. I'm involved in a lot of clubs at school. I love visiting museums and learning. I don't want to rush my childhood because I love being a kid, but the older I get, the closer I'm getting to achieving my dream."





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Participants will be compensated.

The research study is conducted by Weill Cornell Medicine. ENHANCE is a Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center (RERC) funded by the [National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research](#) (NIDILRR; grant number #90REG0012-01-00)

The Choice to Advocate

By David A. Grant



Another Brain Injury Awareness Month is now behind us. I'm pretty experienced in living through Brain Injury Awareness Month, as this year marks my 13th consecutive month as a brain injury survivor. This brings to mind yet another poignant reminder: Every March will mark another consecutive year. Once you are in the brain injury club, like it or not, you have a lifetime membership.

“Early on, I began to fight back to a new normal that I hoped would be an enjoyable, sustainable, and relatively happy life.”

While I can attest to the fact that recovery is indeed lifelong (at least so far), once a brain injury survivor, always a brain injury survivor. There is no end date, no future date circled on a calendar that I can look forward to when I'll officially be recovered. In *"The TBI Guide"* by Dr. Glenn Johnson, he notes that, never in decades of clinical practice working with brain injury survivors, has he seen a single case of someone returning to their pre-injury capability.

Truth be told, this never discouraged me. Early on, I began to fight back to a new normal that I hoped would be an enjoyable, sustainable, and relatively happy life. I can recall saying years ago that if I could get back to even 90%, I'd be one happy guy. Fate, and lots of hard work and discipline, have given me just that. Now in year thirteen post-injury, I consider myself to be blessed beyond measure. I've come to a point of peace with my limitations.

Like crayons color a coloring book, my brain injury quirks color my life. I can say or do things rather unexpectedly thanks to the loss of a filter or two. I have a heretofore unknown purpose in my life: to advocate for those who need a voice. My wife Sarah and I have a happy, healthy, and love-filled home. I am able to work, and just last month, I published my newest book, [*"Thoughts of Hope: Daily Meditations for Ordinary People Affected by Brain Injury."*](#)

Life is far from perfect, but looking at life today compared to the train wreck that my life was during the early years after I was struck down by a teenage driver while cycling, life is as close to a cakewalk as I could hope for.

Let's circle back to Brain Injury Awareness Month. While many people might be tempted to pat each other on the back for another job well done, my opinion is most likely a bit different than many. Long before my injury, I was a news junkie, a trait that I still have today. These days I start the day watching thirty minutes of national news. I follow that up by reading local news here in New Hampshire on my WMUR app. During the day I open my USA Today app a few times to see how the outside world is doing. And evenings find me watching a bit of local news, and when time permits, the national news. I take pride in being well-versed in current events.

In March, my news feed online was chock-full of content about Brain Injury Awareness Month. Because of my backstory, the internet knows of my interests and "feeds" me related articles. But the moment I step outside of that silo, all references to Brain Injury Awareness Month completely disappear.

Over the course of the month, I didn't see a single reference to it. It's not that there were none. I'm sure there were. But as an average consumer of news, using a wide range of media outlets, I would never know about Brain Injury Awareness Month.

I'm wise enough to know that I am not beholden to the power to change the world, but I have to ask: Could more be done to publicize brain injury to those outside of our community? There are no easy answers or quick fixes to this, and I am in no way discounting the work that others do. Rather, I am pondering what more can be done. There are millions of us out there living as brain injury survivors.

Back in the 1970s, my parents made the decision to send me to a private high school for the education that it offered, something I remain grateful for. On Friday mornings, I would skip out on second block to attend



Mass in the auditorium. Some may think that a bit off as I was one of only three non-Catholics in my class. But looking back, one of those early lessons, not taught in a classroom, was a simple five-word statement about how to live life.

"Let it begin with me."

As a brain injury survivor with a voice, I ask, why not? Why not let it begin with me. And I challenge any and all who are part of our community: reach beyond the familiar, dare to bring up brain injury at inconvenient times. You have the power to help end the silence that still remains regarding brain injury.

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.

Living With Hope

By Patrick Brigham



An Overnight Trip

By Natalie McDonald



What a concept. Once so simple, now...not so much. After a brain injury, travel poses a mighty challenge. And packing? That can seem almost impossible. Short-term memory loss, executive memory damage, and fear combine in a toxic stew that may lead to isolation, missing out on experiences and adventure, and damaged relationships because you just give in to staying put.

For some time, possibly a long while after an injury, travel may not be possible. But then, as things start leveling out, you will be faced with some sort of trip and the desire—even need—to be more independent when you go.

Now, eight years post-accident, travel is not quite so difficult for me. When I do go, here are things that help me:

Start with making lists if you are able. My own writing is not very legible, so I lean on Google docs and labels. Create separate sections like “shirts” or “sweaters” and “pants” and “shorts.” “Jackets/coats” is another. Lay out separates to create outfits, and then leave them out so you see them again. This is the slowest part but most helpful. Think about how many days you’ll be gone, what you will be doing, what the weather will be, and if you need any accessories to go along. What shoes will you wear with your outfits? Set them out too. Don’t forget socks or belts. Jewelry? Ties? If you have some time before your trip, start this process up to a week or two before.

Check your medicines to see if you have enough for your stay. Be sure to arrange for refills, and buy travel containers for your pills. Flights are more challenging, so plan through every step. Think through how you’ll travel, and what you will need at your destination, and any other medical

“For some time, possibly a long while after an injury, travel may not be possible. But then, as things start leveling out, you will be



equipment you use. When we fly now, we always arrange with the airline beforehand for an attendant and wheelchair. While I can walk, busy airports, long distances between gates, and all the noise and bustle make a wheelchair a must for me. Noise-canceling headphones, earplugs, comfort blanket... you might need different stuff. So lay these items out too. Car trips need a special posture pillow and frequent stops for me to get out, stretch, and walk for a bit.

Roll your clothes. This simple trick was a major game-changer for me. Not only does it allow you to fit more into your suitcase, but items remain much more visible and easily moved around. In the old days of simply folding clothes, after the second item covered the first one up, I was suddenly unsure of what I had packed. The endless checking made a mess of my suitcase and my brain.

Separate categories in bags. Fabric bags are the best because they breathe and are reusable. My night clothes go in one, my shoes and swimsuits another. My toiletry bag is always ready to go. I tend to use colorful, fun bags that I can easily find and distinguish from each other. Spending a little money and time to buy travel-size toiletries and bags will help a lot when you're faced with the necessity to go somewhere. The best time to prepare for a trip is when there is no trip on your horizon, so you aren't stressed and facing a deadline. Differently colored bright bags have the added benefit of allowing you to choose a color for each category, and then sticking with that color each time you travel.

I walk around and physically put everything that's going to go with us in a corner of our kitchen. Only when I think I have everything do I start packing things up. Otherwise, I lose track. If we need coolers, get those out beforehand waiting to be filled. The actual packing goes pretty quickly because it's simply fitting all the stuff that's already laid out into boxes or bags or coolers.

There are infinite ways and means to travel, and different reasons and lengths of trips. Travel after a brain injury is possible, even desirable. It will just look different. It takes much more deliberate planning, and things will have to move more slowly throughout. There are real beauties in this, but also very real frustrations. Staying at home, with all your adaptations around you, is more comfortable than going into the unknown. While you can't ever foresee and plan for every situation, you can come close. Feeling you're prepared for most eventualities help a lot. I, like many of you, had been a quick mover. Not anymore. I plod. But.... I am much more thorough and organized now, because my ability to "wing it" is almost nonexistent :-)

Travel after a brain injury is possible, even desirable. It will just look different. It takes much more deliberate planning, and things will have to move more slowly throughout.

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will

With three grandchildren (to date) and four children scattered all across the country, we have lots of great places to go, and I want to be able to get there in good shape and good spirits! Happy travels to you.

Meet Natalie McDonald



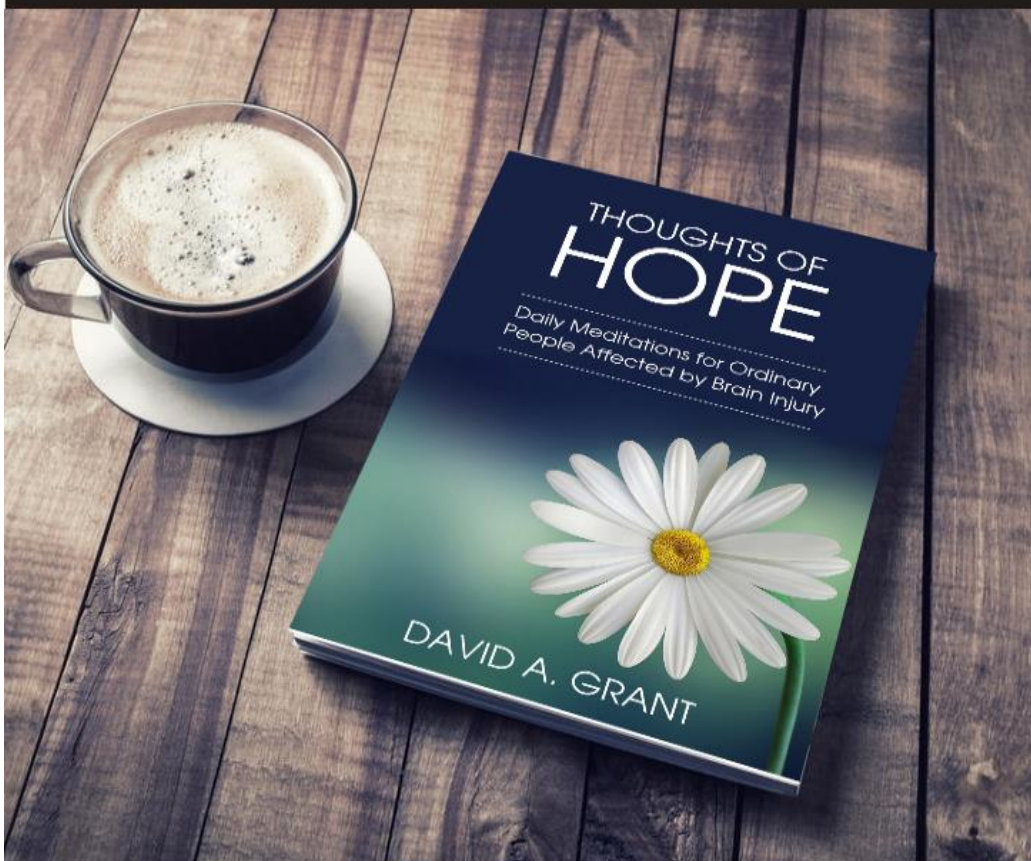
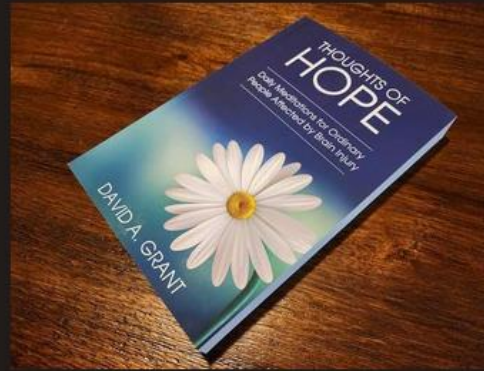
Natalie McDonald lives with her husband Marty outside of Des Moines, Iowa. They have four adult children, Alanna, Ali, Nate, and Evan, and three amazing grandchildren. Natalie suffered a TBI in a car crash in Sept 2014 on her way to an evening musical rehearsal. She was in level 1 coma for 2 months: she was first in ICU then transferred to another section of the hospital. Before Thanksgiving she was taken to On With Life, a brain injury rehabilitation center in Ankeny, IA. In January she improved enough to come home and stay. She returns to On With Life regularly for outpatient therapy and to speak at survivor panels. She blogs at <https://wordblooms.wordpress.com>

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About the Author

David A. Grant is a freelance writer based out of southern New Hampshire and the founder of the Brain Injury Hope Network, one of the world's largest online communities supporting those with brain injury. He is also the author of *Metamorphosis*, *Surviving Brain Injury* and a contributing author to *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Recovering from Traumatic Brain Injuries* as well as a regular contributing writer to Brainline.org, a PBS-sponsored website.

Peeling Back the Layers

By Amy Blasingame



"I have a brain injury... so I've been told. Even after six years, I still struggle to fully come to terms with it, to believe, acknowledge, accept and honor my limitations. My story does not include a traumatic event, a mangled body or a hard-fought recovery that is tangible, quantifiable, recognized and celebrated like so many other TBI survivors. I simply had a fall, at home. After a trip to the ER and a few CT scans, I was sent home with an orbital skull fracture, a concussion and a very bruised face. I was simply told to follow up with a maxillofacial surgeon after the bruising and swelling decreased. I returned to my life the next day and fulltime work the following week. My face healed quickly and in less than a month, everything was back to normal.....at least from the outside.

Early on after my fall, I knew something was off. I could tell things were different for me, cognitively, emotionally and physically, but not enough to cause alarm. I was in my early 40's, a busy working mom with four young kids, so it was easy to push through, ignore and hide my symptoms from myself and others. Over the next 12 months, I started chasing my symptoms and went to numerous doctor visits. My test results and numbers were always within normal limits, but things continued to get worse for me. I was barely hanging on and we were desperate for answers. Today, I now understand that I just could not function at the pace I had been running prior to my injury and my body was giving me a big fat middle finger for pushing myself too much, too far, day after day.

"Over the next 12 months, I started chasing my symptoms and went to numerous doctor visits. My test results and numbers were always within normal limits, but things continued to get worse for me."

It took me over a year to finally get a TBI diagnosis..... how is that even possible? I flew under the TBI radar, even while visiting countless doctors who treated me (or didn't treat me) within their purview, their specialty. I was relieved to finally have a diagnosis, an answer to all my questions and

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a path to recovery. I assumed I would do some therapy, maybe take a few pills, that I'd make a full recovery and be back to the old Amy in no time.

Unfortunately, I learned the hard way that I might have minimized and oversimplified my TBI diagnosis and recovery. I did not have the foresight to understand the gravity or how it would rock my world for many years to come. I continued working fulltime and, in many ways, continued to be the Amy everyone knew and loved. I did everything I could to show myself, and others, that the TBI would not change me. Boy, was I wrong!

The first few years after my injury can be compared to peeling a potato, as so many understand this mindless task. Each day, I would experience just one swipe from that peeler. Initially, I had tough skin and lots of reserves, so there was less awareness. I was able to keep pace with my life, without knowing what was truly happening inside me. Unfortunately, once the first layer peeled away and those reserves slowly became depleted, things really began to hurt and eventually became almost unbearable. Imagine, finding a bruise on the potato and each day, the peeler hits the exact same spot....day after day, layer after layer until that bruise disappears. I continued to lose tiny pieces of me each day, the pain continued and my many symptoms became more and more complex.

Along the way, I've also picked up other neurological, emotional, visual, cognitive and physical difficulties. Some are a direct result of the brain injury and others are a result of my long, arduous journey. They're all intertwined now and most practitioners are perplexed as to how to untangle the web around me. I'm told to fight, to advocate for myself...but then the web becomes tighter and I am more restricted. I am apprehensive because I am exposed and there is more risk of pain. I am also told to relax, to accept this new baseline, my new normal but then the web becomes thicker, stickier and more difficult to pull myself free without assistance. Trying to find the balance between the two feels like balancing on a tightrope high up atop two buildings.

Thankfully, I have never been alone throughout this entire experience. My husband has always been by my side, frantically picking up and collecting the small potato peels that have fallen along the way, bewildered at how to help. In the beginning, it hurt too much when he would fling the peels back onto my tender and exposed outside. Even today, he still sometimes tries to gently put them back, but for the most part, they don't really stick and we both know it. He has learned to just hold me up, to support me, love me and accept me...unconditionally, no matter what shape I am in. We are stronger together and resolute in our commitment to each other. My four amazing kids have come to appreciate the peels, as though they're now littered all about our family home. Over the years, they've kicked, scattered, pegged, eaten, squashed, slid, thrown and torn my peels....you name it, they've done it. But they also respect what the peels represent. They love me and I love them more and more each day.

I've had so many medical professionals enter in and out of the picture. Each playing a role and shifting the direction and angle of that peeler. Whether it was through countless medications, hours of different therapies, conventional and unconventional treatment options....so many different perspectives and assessments. I am thankful for their insights, professionalism and willingness to help. For the most part, we handed them the potato peels and they each tried, within their own expertise and in their own way, to tape, glue or staple them back for me. Some stuck and some did not. In the end, we have not been able to get to the root cause or found a treatment or solution that truly helps with new sustainable growth.

I received this response from one of my doctors very early in my recovery, *"The one thing you learn when you treat brain injury...is that when you see one brain injury...you've seen one brain injury. There is no normal response and really there is no abnormal response."* Seriously, only a local weatherman is given more grace and latitude! And yet, this comment has always resonated with me because it is one of the most hopeful, depressing, honest, vague, simple, discouraging, bittersweet, frustrating and accurate ways to describe a TBI to others. Today, this little spud looks a lot different than it did six years ago. The only way to salvage what remains is to bury it in the dirt, hope and pray that new sprouts begin to flourish from the small potato nub that remains. It needs a warm, safe place to rest and heal in order to grow. Water, nourishing soil, sun, time and faith. If only TBI recovery was that simple.

Meet Amy Blasingame



Amy sustained a TBI after a fall at home in 2017. She lives in Plano, TX with her husband and four children. Prior to her injury, she worked as a project manager for 23 years. Amy passionately believes that the description 'mild' TBI is a medical anomaly because traumatic brain injury of any kind can be life-changing and have a significant impact on the lives of survivors. Amy began writing after her TBI when she had difficulty expressing herself verbally. Writing became an outlet and a way to arrange, process and share all that was swirling around in her rewired brain with providers, family and friends. Amy hopes that through sharing her journey and her struggles, other survivors might find their lost voices too.

Two Years Strong

By Kiana Kay



After a long afternoon of shopping with two young children, Brent and his girlfriend Sarah decided it was time to head home. They strapped Arianna, 21 months old at the time and Aiden, 1 month old, into their car seats and began driving home. Only one town away from home, they came around a turn when a white utility van swerved over the double yellow lines and collided with their Ford Focus, crashing along the driver's side of the car as well as on top of it, forcing the car to flip onto its passenger side.

Upon impact, Brent was thrown from the driver's seat onto his girlfriend in the passenger seat. His left elbow was shattered, his C Spine was injured, and he was knocked unconscious. In the backseat, Arianna was unconscious and bleeding. When the car flipped to its side, a window was shattered, causing Arianna's head to be cut open. Both Brent and Arianna suffered severe brain injuries among other injuries. Sarah's arm was broken when Brent fell on her, but she was fine overall; baby Aiden was in the backseat miraculously unharmed.

“Upon impact, Brent was thrown from the driver's seat onto his girlfriend in the passenger seat. His left elbow was shattered, his C Spine was injured, and he was knocked unconscious.”

When ambulances arrived, Arianna was revived on-scene and then driven to the nearest airport where she was airlifted to Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire, placed into a medically induced coma, and taken into emergency surgery for her open brain injury. Brent was driven to the nearest hospital where he was then airlifted to Dartmouth as well. I couldn't imagine there being anything more alarming than the call you receive being told your child has been in a severe accident and is not breathing.

Sitting on the basement stairs of her house, having a casual conversation with her husband, my mother received a call from Sarah, but there was no noise. After saying Sarah's name three times, Sarah replied with a scream just before the phone got disconnected. A few minutes later, Sarah called my mother back using Brent's phone, frantically explaining what happened. She told my mother that Brent and Arianna were not breathing and that they had been in an accident. I couldn't imagine the amount of fear, panic, disbelief, and helplessness that may have overcome my mother's body in that moment. She got into her car and rushed toward where Brent was.

Once she arrived, she watched as he was lifted up by the helicopter. Unsure what condition he was in, she headed to the hospital he was being flown to. Sarah was taken to the nearest hospital with Aiden to have her broken arm casted and for Aiden to be examined for injuries. The accident happened in Gilford, NH, an hour and a half or so from Lebanon, NH, where Dartmouth Hospital is located. At the hospital, Arianna was in brain surgery for five hours and had a pressure bolt put into her head so that doctors and nurses could measure her intracranial pressure. Brent was brought into the E.R. Trauma bay where nurses were shuffling around placing ice packs on him to get the swelling to go down all over his body.

Doctors were considering whether or not they should amputate his left arm because his elbow was shattered so badly, but they decided against it. He was placed on a ventilator due to collapsed lungs. Twelve hours later, Brent was taken into surgery where surgeons inserted a drainage tube into his skull to drain spinal fluid as well as a pressure bolt to monitor the spike in intracranial pressure. He was covered with different tubes and wires and swollen from head to toe.

Following the surgery, Brent was moved to the Intensive Care Unit because he was in critical condition. Once the chaos had calmed down, doctors came out into the waiting room to get my mother to allow her to finally see Brent. While standing beside Brent, my mother was informed that Brent had suffered a Diffuse Axonal Injury, a brain injury that only 10% of people survive, and they were not sure if Brent would even survive it. The ICU staff and PICU staff were incredibly caring and amazing when working with Brent and Arianna – they are the reason Brent and Arianna are alive today, and our family will be forever grateful!



On January 13, 2017, Arianna woke up from her coma. She started therapies to regain control of her motion and talking. Once well enough, she was transferred from the PICU unit down to pediatrics. As for Brent, he was in the ICU for a month-and-a-half before he was moved to a lower level in the hospital. He was doing better but still unconscious and needing twenty-four-hour care. On February 7, 2017, Arianna was discharged from Dartmouth Hospital and transferred to Spaulding Rehabilitation Center in Charlestown, Massachusetts so she could get well enough to finally go home. Arianna's progress was incredible, but Brent was still struggling to wake fully and overcome episodes of storming. Storming is what happens to people after they've had a brain injury; often times, it comes in episodes causing posturing or tightening of the whole body, high blood pressure spikes, anxiety, tachycardia as well as other symptoms.

The amount of trauma Brent and Arianna had to go through both physically and mentally can never be fully described. It was so sad to watch but also inspiring. Through it all, they never gave up and worked so hard to get to where they are today. It has been two years and counting since their car accident. Arianna is four years old and is doing better than ever. She loves swimming, running, learning, and she's happy. Brent is 28 years old, improving more each day at his new rehab. Although he cannot walk and is still very physically disabled, his wheelchair gives him the independence to move around. He enjoys music, television, and special visits from loved ones. Brent has spoken countless times since his accident, but he suffers from aphasia, unfortunately, so it's a rare occurrence.

He communicates with his eyes and expressions and always finds ways to show our mother or nurses what he wants or needs. He has a will to live, and he doesn't give up! No matter what comes his way, illness, or other obstacles, Brent never gives up. My only hope is that our family's story can bring hope to others who may have experienced this or may feel hopeless. Never give up on your loved ones and always be there for them, no matter what journey they have ahead of them.

Meet Kiana Kay

Kiana Kay, a former Ophthalmic Technician is now a stay at home mother of one. When she is not outside exploring with her little one and significant other, she is at home teaching her daughter using the Montessori Method. She is the proud little sister of a very resilient traumatic brain injury survivor and spends most of her free time outdoors or going to the beaches of sunny Florida where she resides.

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Molting Everyday

By Will Carter



Emily Dickinson once wrote, "I am out with lanterns looking for myself." I can relate to this sentiment, as I have spent much of my life searching for my true self. However, it has taken me many years to find the tools I need to light my way on this journey.

On the night of October 7th, 2007, I was driving home from my job at Shane's Ribshack. The following morning, I was scheduled to take the SAT for a second time to improve my math score, which would increase my chances of being accepted into my dream school at the time, Wake Forest. I had spent months working with a tutor and felt confident in my abilities. However, that night, while on the phone with my friend Peter, my 95 Honda Accord was involved in a head-on collision with a suburban. The accident resulted in a brain injury, stroke, collapsed lung, ruptured spleen, and a medically induced coma. When I woke up, my car was in a junkyard, and my life had been forever changed.

"The accident resulted in a brain injury, stroke, collapsed lung, ruptured spleen, and a medically induced coma. When I woke up, my car was in a junkyard, and my life had been forever changed."

Prior to my injury, I was a young man with a bright future. I excelled in AP classes, was the president of the Drama Club, a debate tournament champion, an award-winning Model UN-er, and a playwright. I had a sense of confidence that I would become someone of notoriety and influence, and this belief was shared by others. Of course, I had my insecurities and parts of myself that I wished I could hide, but for the most part, I was comfortable in my own skin. However, looking back, I cannot say for sure who I truly was because I have built up a version of myself in my mind that may not be entirely accurate. During my recovery, I exerted a lot of effort to become the person I was before the

accident, but in reality, that person no longer exists. The former me was the answer to all my problems, and I believed that if I could just recover, my life would be perfect again.

After a brain injury or stroke, it is one of the hardest things to accept that the person you once were no longer exists and to embrace the new version of yourself. It's much easier to hold onto the hope of becoming the exact person you were before the injury, but this is like trying to hold water in your hands - you can't keep it all. There is no "you" from yesterday, only the "you" of today. This current version of yourself has been through a great deal, and although you may not be able to do things as you once did, you are a new person. The old version of yourself is gone, and you have shed it for the newly born person post-injury.

In reality, we are all molting every day. We wake up every morning having shed the person of yesterday for the person we are today. However, instead of embracing the person we are today, many of us spend our time searching for yesterday's skin. But it's gone, swallowed up by the earth. It's time to stop seeking that which is lost and start searching for the person you are now.

It took me twelve long years, but I finally started to love who I am now instead of constantly searching to recover the former me. Of course, I have days where I wish for my former faculties, but it's much better to light the lantern and search for the current me. It's time to seek out who you are and enjoy the journey of getting to know and love the person you are today. Not who you were or who you will be, but the person you are right now. Go on the glorious journey of spelunking through the endless depths of you.

The old version of yourself is gone, and you have shed it for the newly born person post-injury.

Meet Will Carter



In 2007, Will was involved in a car accident and suffered a brain injury. Despite this setback, he went on to receive his Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting from Boston University and his Master of Arts in Teaching from the University of Louisville. Will's written works have been published in Brain Injury Today, Uncomfortable Revolution, The Calderwood Press, His View from Home, The Aorta Reporter, and The Fourth World Journal. Currently, Will resides in Georgia where he teaches full-time at Kennesaw State University. He has also written a memoir entitled "Getting Better" about his brain injury and recovery, which will be published by Running Wild Press in 2024/2025.

**EVEN TEXTERS
AND DRIVERS
HATE TEXTERS
AND DRIVERS.**

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My Brain Injury Journey

By Jeff Willis



I never would have guessed that it would happen to me. By "it," I mean four strokes and an aneurysm all at once. I lived an amazing life as an industrial painter. I took pride in my work and came home to my beautiful red-headed wife and three children each day. I was a father, husband, son, coworker, and provider. On New Year's Day in 2006, the life I knew turned upside down. "New Year's" is certainly about change. That change in my life meant learning how to do essentially everything all over again.

I don't remember much, but from what I am told, I suddenly had an onset of bizarre symptoms while working on my Dodge Dakota in the driveway at my house in Colorado. My wife Cherie knew something was wrong. I was transported to North Suburban Medical Hospital where everyone learned I had four strokes and an aneurysm, then was flown on Flight for Life to Swedish Hospital.

"I don't remember much, but from what I am told, I suddenly had an onset of bizarre symptoms while working on my Dodge Dakota in the driveway at my house in Colorado."

My wife was told there was little chance of my survival, and in the case that I did survive, my quality of life would be compared to a "vegetable." If you had told me that I would have this severe injury and survived it years ago, I would have never believed you. After being admitted to Swedish Hospital, I was on life support for a month in the intensive care unit. Over the next several years, I had to learn how to walk, talk, read, write, communicate, eat, swallow, and everything in between all over again. I felt completely lost and admittedly don't remember much of my recovery for the first four-to-five years. There were stages I went through in this time that were difficult and strange. Some of the stages included hallucinations, food and drinks exhibiting a "mud-like" taste, a feeling of constant motion as if being on a moving bus, balance and coordination problems that made me walk on my tippy-toes, stunted hair growth, agnosia (being unable to correctly identify objects), disorientation (being unable to detect time and space), and a

disrupted sleep schedule. However, in that time, I made huge strides such as getting out of my wheelchair, remembering family and friends again, being able to hold a conversation, and many other things.

I am still working on learning basic skills each and every day, such as improving my memory, learning how to socialize appropriately, navigating the grocery store, decreasing impulsive behaviors, etc. What has helped me the most has been God, my family, independent living skills trainers, Dr. Guri Singh (my primary care doctor), and a day program. You really have to get to a point where you can accept help from everyone. This doesn't take away from your unique abilities and attributes. You still have so much to give to the world and other survivors. Since I have been so accepting of care and advice, here's mine to all of you who have sustained a TBI:

- Give it to God.
- Interact and make connections with other brain injury survivors – we can help one another.
- Never stop sharing your story.
- Pick up hobbies that keep your mind occupied, such as fishing.
- Stay humorous, tell jokes and never take life too seriously.
- Ask loved ones and caregivers to remind you of your progress.
- Stay proactive with your health.
- Always have goals to accomplish.
- Exercise at least once per week.
- Challenge yourself to cognitive activities.
- Have something to take care of such as a plant, an animal, etc..
- Get some sunshine..

Brain injuries come in many forms. Regardless of the cause, we all experience loss and changes. You can't change the circumstance, but you can change your attitude. Brain injuries are hard to describe, but I like to think of them as a chance for a new life, a time to start over. When life is slowed down you learn to love deeper, find inventive ways to do things, and find beauty in the details. "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get" -Forrest Gump. Sometimes your chocolate is a brain injury.

Meet Jeff Willis



Jeff was born in Pineville, Louisiana. Throughout his life he has lived in several states including Louisiana, Texas, Georgia, and Colorado (where he currently resides). He has worked several jobs including fishing on an oyster boat, selling car parts for Chevrolet, and painting for an industrial painting company. Jeff sustained his brain injury in Colorado where he was treated and continuously participates in rehabilitation.

SPECIAL SECTION

LOVE YOUR BRAIN Y O G A

By Kyla Pearce



In the blink of an eye, Kevin Pearce went from being an Olympic gold medal hopeful to suffering a near-fatal TBI. By drawing upon his own unwavering optimism, the resilience that he developed as a world-class athlete, the love of his family, and the support of numerous healthcare professionals and caregivers, Kevin made amazing progress that continues to this day. His journey led him to found the LoveYourBrain Foundation in 2014 alongside his brother, Adam Pearce, to serve others affected by TBI through programs that build community.

Kevin’s TBI gave the Pearce family a glimpse into a new world—one where many people affected by this injury are plagued by intense isolation and disempowerment. This revealed the need for programs to rebuild community and resilience for healing. Post-injury, Kevin attended a yoga class and personally realized the potential of this practice to transform people’s wellbeing, both physically and through the community connection. Yoga, a mind-body healing modality, has been shown to improve outcomes in a broad array of clinical populations, yet has not been used widely among the brain injury population. The practice of yoga integrates physical movement (asana), breathing exercises (pranayama), and meditation practices to promote strength, coordination, stress reduction, and self-regulation. Several studies have examined the benefits of yoga for brain injury, which found improvements in

“Kevin attended a yoga class and personally realized the potential of this practice to transform people’s wellbeing.”

attention skills, memory, mental fatigue, self-esteem, and quality of life. However, at the time, no organization was offering accessible yoga to people with TBI and their caregivers at a national level.

Serendipitously, as Kevin was experiencing the profound benefits of yoga, Kyla Pearce, Adam Pearce’s wife and Kevin’s sister-in-law, was completing her certification to be a yoga teacher and Adam was using vipassana meditation to support his own healing. Together, they chose to focus one arm of LYB’s programming on yoga because they believed its holistic and dynamic nature could meet the individual needs of each person with TBI, from wanting to rebuild strength and balance, to manage stress, and to find comfort in a community of people with shared experiences.

As Adam shared, “a big part of our motivation to create LYB Yoga stemmed from the transformation we saw in Kevin from his own practice. After a yoga class, Kev would share that, for the first time in a while, his mind felt calm and he was able to take a break from the race of trying to keep up. I also noticed that he loved the feeling of accomplishment that he received from engaging with what he deemed was a fitting challenge (be it focusing his mind in meditation or holding a strength-building yoga posture), instead of assessing his progress based on some medical benchmark. When he practiced yoga, he no longer felt defined by his injury.”

To address the unmet need for TBI-friendly yoga, LYB partnered with Dartmouth College to conduct a study that Kyla designed to evaluate an 8-week gentle yoga pilot program for this population (Donnelly et al., 2017). This study found that 16 people who participated in the yoga intervention

reported significant improvements in their quality of life, most notably in their self-esteem and future outlook and in their ability to manage negative emotions like loneliness, anxiety, and anger. In contrast, the 15 people in the control group did not experience any significant improvements. Other feedback revealed that participants also valued opportunities to connect with other students in the class to learn from each other and normalize their TBI experience.



Based on the positive results of the pilot study, LoveYourBrain finalized the curriculum and officially launched the LoveYourBrain Yoga program in November 2015. This 6-week program is offered free of cost for both people with TBI and caregivers. Each 90-minute class integrates breathing exercises, gentle yoga, meditation, and group discussion based on empowering themes. LoveYourBrain partners with yoga studios across North America and trains and compensates their yoga teachers to offer LoveYourBrain Yoga in their respective communities. Teachers are trained to address a range of TBI-related symptoms by adapting specific poses to prevent dizziness and headaches, offering similar movements in a similar sequence to support learning and memory, using soft lighting and no or soothing music to mitigate hypersensitivity, and incorporating strategies to focus attention and release negative thoughts.

Once people complete the program, they can access other gentle yoga classes taught by LYB-trained teachers at a discounted rate so that they can sustain their practice and community connection. LoveYourBrain Yoga programs are run four times a year (i.e., January, April, July, October) and people sign up directly on their website.

Kyla Pearce, Senior Director of the LYB Yoga program, shared that, for her, the “aha” moment was the first time she taught LoveYourBrain Yoga at a wellness center in New Hampshire for a group of 10 people with TBI. “Based on feedback from our pilot study about the need for more community connection, we changed the structure of our program to incorporate 20 minutes of group discussion at the end of each class. This was somewhat of a gamble, since people with TBI often struggle with

attention control, information processing, and emotional regulation, so I wasn't sure whether our participants would want or be able to engage in group discussion. How wrong was I? As I listened to the story sharing and cross-learning in the group discussion, I witnessed participants regain their agency, feel accepted and understood, and experience the possibility instead of the limitations of their body and mind for the first time since their injury. I realized that people were gaining so much more than the physical benefits of yoga. We were helping to rebuild community for a group of people that so often experience intense isolation, which was incredibly powerful."

LoveYourBrain is trying to address one of the major issues for the TBI community—the gap in ongoing support following inpatient and rehabilitation services. Because TBI is often an “invisible”



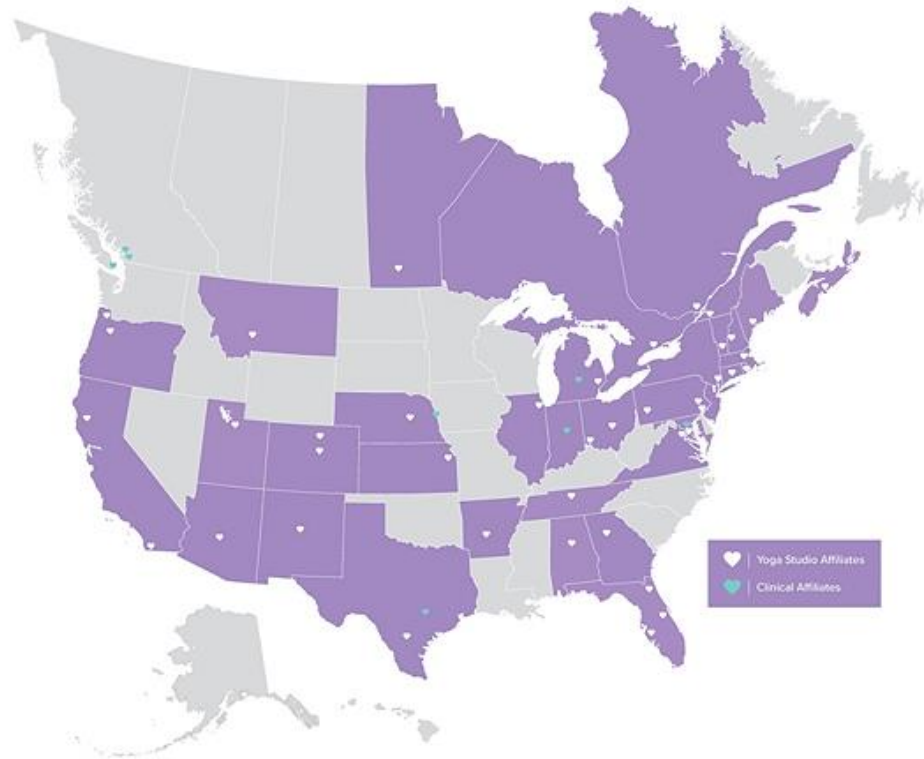
injury, many people are unaware of the effects of the injury and thus are unable to act with understanding and compassion. Therefore, yoga studios offer an important community-based avenue for ongoing rehabilitation, in particular because they support holistic—physical, emotional, social, and spiritual—healing. Kyla shared that ultimately, their vision for LoveYourBrain Yoga is to create a more seamless continuum of care for people with brain injury. “We host comprehensive 20-hour trainings for yoga teachers and clinicians working in brain injury rehabilitation to learn best practices for adapting yoga for brain injury, and how to offer our program in both community and clinical settings.

We also give scholarships to people with TBI and caregivers to attend our training so that they can be advocates for the benefits of yoga in their communities. We want people to experience the benefits of yoga-based tools early on in their rehabilitation, then, when they're ready, to transition to our program at a yoga studio in their community to continue their healing. At its core, yoga is a practice of deep listening to—and honoring of—our vast capacity to be with whatever life throws at us without resisting it. I believe touching into this capacity leads to more authentic and compassionate self-expression and to regaining a sense of purpose, which are critical to any healing process.”

Over the years, LoveYourBrain has been working tirelessly to expand access to LoveYourBrain Yoga across North America. Currently, the program is offered through partnerships with 50 yoga studios and 8 clinical facilities across 29 U.S. states and 4 Canadian provinces. Altogether, 244 LYB Yoga programs have been offered for nearly 2,500 people with TBI and caregivers. LoveYourBrain is proud that their program is serving people from TBI across the spectrum of severity, including mild (concussions), moderate, and severe injury, and with variable symptoms and comorbidities, including light sensitivity (44%), post-concussion syndrome (30%), and PTSD (15%). To ensure equity in

access to their program, LoveYourBrain has an ambitious goal of expanding LoveYourBrain Yoga to all 50 states.

A small team of passionate and dedicated staff conduct extensive outreach to generate awareness among the TBI community about their local LoveYourBrain Yoga program.



Kim Baker, Director of Implementation, shared that “we’ve found about 25% of people who sign up for our program are referred by clinicians specializing in TBI rehabilitation. So, our team hosts in-service presentations at clinical facilities and presents at conferences like Brain Injury Association’s annual state conferences to engage clinicians and other TBI advocacy organizations. We also have established a network of volunteers called Clinical Connectors who are clinicians working in TBI rehabilitation that have agreed to raise awareness in their health service about LoveYourBrain Yoga. We believe partnering with health professionals is critical to the sustainability and expansion of our program.”

LYB is also dedicated to designing rigorous research to evaluate the impact of their programs. They feel that by contributing to the development of evidence-based practices, the medical establishment will recognize yoga as a viable healing modality and increasingly integrate it into the healthcare system. This way, people affected by TBI will experience a more seamless continuum of care where they can access ongoing support and participate in their community. For example, LoveYourBrain Yoga was evaluated in a qualitative research study (Donnelly et al., 2019), which demonstrated improvements in strength, balance, flexibility, and attention control and greater sense of belonging,

community connection, and ability to move forward with their lives. As one LoveYourBrain Yoga program participant shared, *“LYB yoga gave me something to look forward to in contrast to so many days that I feel I have no purpose, (and the things I want to do I cannot tolerate or do not have the energy or ability.) My “best” days (or parts) are always followed by my “worst”. Yoga helped me with balance. It is a good day that is not followed by a bad day to recover. Knowing I was likely to have a positive experience one day/week for six weeks was reassuring. The classes helped me feel more optimistic and relaxed. The yoga improved my strength and flexibility.”*

LoveYourBrain also implements two other program areas. The LoveYourBrain Retreat program includes week-long holistic health retreats for people with TBI and weekend retreats for caregivers. The Retreats are designed with an integrated approach using their core pillars of community, mindfulness, movement, and nutrition. LoveYourBrain believes these pillars help people cultivate the resilient mindset, physical capability, and support system essential to one’s health and happiness.

The Education program teaches youth about key concepts related to traumatic brain injury—what it is, how often it happens, and the potential consequences—to give youth important perspective about their brain health. LoveYourBrain also uses The HBO documentary, The Crash Reel, which showcases Kevin’s TBI experience and healing journey, as a powerful platform for raising awareness about TBI.

More information about LoveYourBrain and the LoveYourBrain Yoga, Retreat, and Education programs can be found on their website at www.loveyourbrain.com. To sign up for LoveYourBrain Yoga, please visit their website (www.loveyourbrain.com/yoga/practice), or if you don’t live near a LoveYourBrain Yoga program, you can access their library of free yoga and meditation recordings here: (www.loveyourbrain.com/resources-overview)

Meet Kyla Pearce, MPH, PHD, CBIS, RYT-200



Dr. Kyla Pearce serves as the Senior Director of the LoveYourBrain Yoga program, overseeing the design, implementation, and evaluation of the program on an international level. She has been part of the Pearce family for years and, following Kevin's accident, played an integral role in the launch of LoveYourBrain. Kyla has blended her expertise as a yoga teacher and researcher to develop a TBI-focused yoga curriculum, train yoga teachers and clinicians to deliver this curriculum, and lead ongoing evaluations of its impact. As a Post-doctoral Research Scholar at Dartmouth College, Kyla leads a research portfolio in the application of yoga and meditation for community-based rehabilitation for populations with neurological conditions.

Editor’s Note: The above article is a reprint of an article previously published in HOPE Magazine

News & Views

By David & Sarah Grant



It's important to understand that every brain injury is unique, but there is a shared experience among the readers of HOPE Magazine. They look forward to reading first-hand accounts from other survivors because it helps them feel less isolated and more understood. It's also essential to include perspectives from family members and caregivers since brain injury affects not only the survivor but also those around them.

As Brain Injury Awareness Month comes to a close, it's easy for others to move on to other topics, but for those of us who are directly impacted by brain injury, we don't have that luxury. We face the challenges of each day with bravery and strength, doing the best we can with the cards we've been dealt.

If HOPE Magazine has been a source of comfort and inspiration for you, we encourage you to share it with someone you know who may also benefit from it. It's important to raise awareness about this often invisible injury so that more people can understand and support those affected by it.



We wish you peace,

David & Sarah