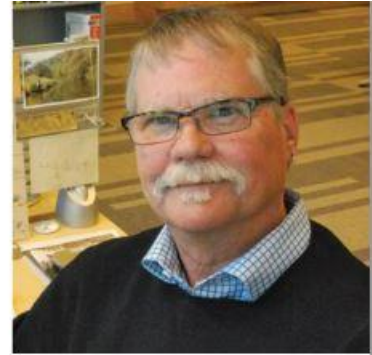


Recovery After Brain Injury Never Stops

By Phil Gonzales, Public Awareness Associate



Midwesterners have a reputation for being a subdued people; we aren't known for our risky behavior or acts of extreme physical endangerment. But, brain injury can find its way into your life under the most seemingly mundane circumstances.

Ric Johnson fell off a ladder while cleaning his gutters.

That's it. He missed a rung coming down the ladder, fell and hit his head on the concrete driveway. Ric's daughter down below saw the fall, yelled for help and called 911. The next few hours were a whirlwind of confusion with Abby trying to fill in Ric's medical history for the hospital staff while trying to contact Ric's wife Beth. Hours later, Beth arrived to find Ric strapped down to his bed, hooked up to machines and, as the doctor told her, "not in good shape."

Slowly, visitors arrived: Ric and Beth's son got a ride from school in Duluth, Ric's brother, sister and neighbors began arriving to spend an hour at a time in the ICU with Ric.

One of the barriers Ric's family hit early on was finding a way through the confusing medical jargon that hospital staff used when explaining Ric's condition. It was his son who finally hit on the idea of calling his soccer coach and pediatrician. "He became an advocate and translated the medicalesse into layman's terms."

After several days, surgeons performed a craniectomy to remove pressure on Ric's brain and allow the swelling to go down on its own. Throughout this time, Ric was in a medically induced coma. After three weeks, Ric was weaned off of his drugs and that is where the healing process began.

"I don't remember much about that month," Ric says. "They tested me to see if I could follow motions and simple instructions. I tried to talk to people, but speech was very hard. My eyes were unfocused and I wasn't really aware of my surroundings."

"I couldn't write that well – it would be spelled wrong – but they could kind of understand what I was trying to write."

Ric was sent to Bethesda Hospital and placed in intense speech and physical therapy to help him relearn daily tasks like feeding himself and communicating with others.

"I really wanted a cup of coffee," he says. "I would point and say 'I want coffee.' It was always, 'No. The doctor says no coffee for you!' And that was a come down for me. So it was an ongoing joke: 'Ric's going to ask for coffee!'"

Ric was surrounded by supportive family and friends the whole time he spent in the hospital. His wife and daughter came every evening while his son continued his freshman year in Duluth. After Bethesda Hospital, Ric continued his occupational and physical therapies at Regions Hospital, finally working his way out of a wheelchair and beginning to master his speaking ability.

One time at breakfast, he asked for a cup of coffee. After being refused by his doctor, a friendly nurse relented and allowed Ric one cup a day. "They didn't have good coffee, but it was coffee!"

All this time, unbeknownst to Ric, his employer was holding his job, waiting for his return.

"I had a supervisor and coworker come by just to say 'We're waiting for you at work.'"

For years, Ric had been working within the Hennepin County Library system. First as a manager of the Media Lab, then as the Help Desk supervisor, then as computer trainer for the county and ultimately as Web Developer, the position he currently holds. In fact, Ric had started his Web development position one month before his brain injury occurred.

Ric reentered the work force after six months of recovery.

"The library is family," Ric says. "I worked at the library for 23 years. I'm not a 'legend,' but everyone at the library knows me. When I had my injury, the library didn't know if I'd go back to full time, but they said, 'if you can't, let us know and you'll go part time.' The library is a great family."

"I started trying to work again in June," he says. "I couldn't work full-time, but that was good because trying to be at work and then therapy sessions just wore me out. So I started at four hours a week and then eight, then twelve, twenty. I was able to start driving and was up to 32 hours in the summer. Because my therapy was going so well, I got down to three times a week so I could add hours

to work. As soon as I got home? Nap time.

"The big thing is, they allowed me the time it took. There was no time schedule for them. My coworkers picked up the slack, my supervisor would say if you need to leave, leave. They gave me the time."

Many people face an uphill challenge attempting to return to work after a brain injury. Employers may not understand the extent of an injury and without visible cues may assume an employee is or should be capable of returning to a full workload at a full-time schedule. However, people living with the effects of a brain injury may have memory issues, communication issues and basic fatigue issues that prevent them from working as long or intensely as they had previously.

"It really was hard to go back to full time," Ric says. "You get tired so easily. I can't really leave my desk and take a nap during work! So, I did as much as I could. I finally went back to full time in October of 2004. Courage Center, my wife and I said therapy was great but being at work was the most important therapy I could do."

Besides the fatigue he still experiences, Ric lives with the effects of aphasia, a dysfunction in certain areas of the brain that can range from having difficulty remembering words to completely losing the ability to speak, read and write.

"It's never going away," Ric says. "Aphasia is the gift that keeps on giving. I could be at a meeting and miss a word or say the wrong word. I think it always will be there."

"It's also hard for me to filter out background noises. If there's five or six people talking and someone starts talking to me I won't realize they are. I don't go to events with lots of people and when I do, I go off by myself."

The biggest thing Ric still deals with is his short term memory loss. But, he's come up with his own therapy to help keep his memory strong.

"I now play the mandolin," he explains. "I bought a cheap, good beginners mandolin and started mandolin classes. That's been almost two years now. I think it's helped my short-term memory. I never played anything like it before so not only do I need to figure out how to strum or pick or read sheet music; I have to remember how to play it the next day and the day after that. I can probably play more than 20 songs I'd never heard before. That was one of my keys: find a new hobby for my short-term memory."

Today, in addition to his mandolin and work at the library, Ric volunteers as a co-facilitator for a Golden Valley brain injury support group. He is also a part of the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance's Speakers Bureau.

"I was thinking I hadn't given anything back," he says, "and I needed to do something."

So I went to the [Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance] website and there was a thing called the Midwest Advocacy Project. I thought I'd start with that one. So I went through that training and one of the things we talked about was the Speakers Bureau and I thought I could do that too!"

In 2011 Ric attended two rallies for Hennepin County Medical Center, talking to doctors and nurses about the recovery process and the impact brain injury has on the family.

"I think having a brain injury as a silent or invisible injury is wrong; we have to alert others that brain injury is terrible not only for the person who has it but the families as well. I think being a speaker will help other people live through that process of recovery because as one great poet said, 'It's a long strange trip.' And we're not the same people we were before. Recovery does happen. Doctors tell families that the recovery is a two-year process and that the survivor will plateau and it stops. Well, there are things I can do today that maybe I couldn't do yesterday. The recovery never stops."

Two weeks before the tenth anniversary of his injury, Ric's family, coworkers and friends surprised him with a massive party celebrating his decade of recovery. Seventy people attended and managed to keep it a secret from Ric up until he arrived.

"We got there at 2:30 and left at 10 at night. Seventy people and my filtering was quite a problem. Everyone was laughing and singing and having a great time. It was just so impressive. I couldn't believe it! The event was called 'Thanks That You Didn't Bite It.' Now, I have to plan what I'm going to do for my twenty year!"

