

Families struggle with loved ones' disabilities

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

This is the second in a series of articles on head injury — the deceptive and disabling affliction that devastates victim and family alike. We meet families and friends who cope day-by-day with loved ones dramatically changed by injuries ranging from a minor blow to life-threatening trauma. As one family member put it, "dead, but still living."

Crystal Gulley, an Oakland County mother of four, is more aware than most of the lingering effects of head injury.

In 1980, her eldest son, Dan, now 33, was in a coma for one month after a motorcycle accident in California.

In 1983, her eldest daughter, Diane, now 29, was comatose for one week after an auto accident in Louisiana.

Both are brain damaged and experience seizures that defy medical treatment. Neither is medically insured.

"With Dan, I had never heard of head injury. I never recognized the residuals," she said, speaking of the lasting personality changes, permanent disabilities in mental and emotional functioning and lifelong medical problems.

"With Diane, I knew the procedure so in some ways it was easier, but I kept thinking, I've been through this. I don't know if I can do it again."

Facing no alternative, Gulley persevered, turning to alternative treatments, stressing diet, for lack of medical insurance. The continuing struggle is arduous.

"We just get to thinking we'll be driving again. Independence. And then, a seizure and we're back to square one."

The source of her most profound sadness: "Their loss of friends. The fact they can't drive. The seizures." "You can't dwell on what might have been. You must concentrate on what will be."

The family's response to head injury involves distinct, overlapping stages: shock at the time of injury; elation when the injured person is declared to be out of medical danger; reality when the permanence of many deficits; crisis



associated with the continued difficulty of living with the injured person; mourning over the loss of the still living individual and finally, redefining the relationship.

Journal of Cognitive Rehabilitation

"I lost part of my mom," said 16-year-old Sheila Trahey of Union Lake. She has been acting mother and homemaker for her family of eight since "exchanging roles" with her mother in March 1988.

Sheila's parents were injured in a minor auto mishap. They were treated and released from an area hospital. Her father recovered. Her mother has yet to recover.

"In a way, I feel like I've been deprived of part of my childhood," said the high school junior who cooks, cleans and cares for five siblings ages four to 13 years.

Before the accident, "I used to come home from school and talk with her, about things going on. Afterwards, it was like she couldn't handle it."

A year after the accident, Sheila's mother underwent inner ear surgery. It was discovered she had sustained brain damage from the accident.

"In a way, it's a relief to know what it is. But it's gonna take a long time to fix it. She's more like her old self, but she's changed emotionally, physically and mentally."

The reaction of family members to brain injury can be compared to the mourning process which accompanies most significant losses. Dramatic behavior changes in the injured individual diminishes the family's belief their loved one will ever be the same again. During the early stages, there is customarily a mobilization of support from friends and others. Eventually, however, the family must cope alone.

Journal of Rehabilitation

FIVE YEARS AGO, life was looking good for Kimberly and Kevin

Reid. Married four years, and the parents of two youngsters ages 1 and 2, Kevin had just started a new job and the family had recently moved into a new Rochester Hills townhouse.

Then on a warm summer evening in 1985, their world changed forever. Kevin was struck by an automobile while riding a bicycle. He was 23 years old at the time.

He was taken to a hospital or a recovery facility ever since, visiting home when able on weekends and holidays.

Kevin is gone. He's never going to be the person I married," Kimberly said in a soft, halting voice. Now 27, she knows the possibility of a full marriage is extremely remote.

We converse, but not on an adult level. He's been in a wheel chair on and off the whole time and he just had his leg amputated. Every operation, we start over. He can't do things other fathers can. We just take each day as it comes.

"There are moments when I think I can't handle it anymore. It's probably just the type person I am, but I have confidence life will get better for Kevin. I'm not going to give up, at least not yet. He's the father of my children." At first, he did not remember them.

Some time back, Kimberly decided Kevin should live in a support facility to lessen his dependence upon her. "I'm his wife, not his mother. We had to get back into a husband-wife relationship."

The conclusion of brain damage takes two forms in the marriage, leaving or remaining and assuming the role of caretaker. Many young spouses opt to terminate the marriage so they can re-establish a meaningful life. Other spouses complete grieving their lost partner but remain available



Andy Harris, a 1986 graduate of Redford Union High who attended college on a full music scholarship, listens to Pat O'Connell of Union Lake. Both are brain injured from auto accidents. "It's been sheer hell," O'Connell said. "I

as a caretaker.

"Overlooked Victims" by Elizabeth Zeigler

"I've very much alone with this. Very few stayed with me," said Julie Welles of friendships before and after the head injury she sustained last March when the car she was driving spun out of control during an ice storm. (A 21-year-old brother died two years earlier in an auto accident.)

Welles, 28, of Plymouth, only recently returned to work after a "living hell of relearning how to talk and walk." During the recovery, only two friends held strong — one was a close friend of long standing, the other a social acquaintance from Westland named Linda May.

At 27, May is more aware of disabilities than most. For 10 years she has been employed as a rehab para-

professional, working with the brain injured, mentally ill and the elderly. The relationship has grown into close friendship between the two but has been fraught with "hurt feelings."

It's really hard as a friend. You expect more of people (in friendship), than if you're working with them." May said, startling herself by the awareness.

"Julie would forget things, like she didn't come to my mother-in-law's funeral. Then she'd call and never mention it. My feelings were really hurt."

"Sometimes she was quick tempered. I took that personally. I thought we had a personality conflict, but then I had to put it in perspective. She was injured."

Welles is lucky with May. Among the many losses suffered by those with brain injury, the one thing

many say hurts the most and causes depression is the loss of friends who desert them during recovery.

If we are going to live in a better, more creative and productive world, then (friends, family and others) are going to have to help make it happen. It can't be put solely on the head of the injured person to figure everything out for themselves. It is a very lonely, confusing, frustrating, terrifying and painful world we live in from day to day for the rest of our lives.

"Turning Points" A book of personal essays

Next, we look at no fault insurance in Michigan as it relates to head injury.

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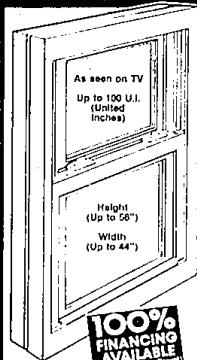
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