

HEAD INJURY

For survivors, recovery is a long road

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

A fresh notebook accompanies Karen Near everywhere. The 42-year-old Oakland County wife and mother devotes one page each to her husband and four adult children.

"Anything important they say to me has to be written down," she said in a wispy voice, flashing a broad smile.

"My family tells me I even smiled in the coma."

Four years ago this month, Near's car was crushed beneath a semi-trailer that pulled in front of her. She survived.

"It was harder on my family. I slept through most of it," two months in a coma at Botsford Hospital in Farmington Hills, four months hospitalization at St. Joseph's in Ypsilanti and a year of intense rehabilitation.

Prior to the accident, Near, once an avid snow skier and ice skater, managed her husband's Novi-based engineering firm. Today, she handles overdue accounts by telephone.

"It's easy. I make notes on the invoice. It's right in front of me," helping her recall the task at hand after dialing the phone. Otherwise, she is apt to forget.

Of the notebook that accompanies her everywhere: "I can't remember what was said yesterday. That hurts," she said, her broad smile perhaps a bit less so in a momentary flash of recall.

Head injuries can be placed in two categories: penetrating injuries and closed head injuries. Closed head injury is the most common type outside a war zone. Although no object penetrates the brain, it may still be severely damaged. Until recently, 90 percent of patients with severe head injury died. Today, at least 50 percent survive but it still is the number one killer of persons under the age of 44.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Looking into a fish bowl that hasn't been cleaned in six months is how Dennis Sparks describes the immediate aftermath of a blow to the back of his head after slipping and falling on water at work last February.

Unlike most who suffer head injury, Sparks, 43, of Westland, has full recall of the accident and is vividly aware of the changes in himself since.

"I was devoted to family, whatever was best for them. I was devoted to my job and the American way, making things work. I was a very busy person." A happily married father of three young hockey players, Sparks had not missed a day of work as a skilled craftsman in 20 years.

Today, "I didn't feel guilty laying on the couch. I cry for no reason. Hated, I guess about what happened. I can't get it out of my head. I take my situation out on my family, the people I'm closest to. The guys I used to work with, only one has come around. That makes me wonder about myself."

Sparks begins to cry softly. "It's hard to figure just who I really am."

After falling, Sparks was examined by a company doctor and in a

hospital emergency room. He was sent home from work to recuperate from what was thought to be a minor injury.

He now attends out-patient rehabilitation therapy at Detroit's Harper Hospital and is temporarily residing in a Wayne County support facility. He makes periodic visits home.

The disabling effects of brain injury can be pronounced, even among those who are mildly injured and seem to make a full recovery. There are usually lingering deficiencies, including marked psychological, emotional and personality changes. Changes involve inability to learn, remember, process new information or think abstractly, as well as irritability, anger and depression. Many also suffer motivational problems, leading to frustration and plunging self-esteem.

National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation

Shortly after graduating with honors from Michigan State University in 1983, Helaine Bank was on the fast track with a major corporation in Chicago. Less than two years later, she was battling for simple survival after being sandwiched between a truck and a bus while driving home from work.

"I went right back to work. I had something to prove, the blonde woman," now 29 and living in a Southfield apartment. "I looked the same. But I wasn't the same. The first sign was behavioral problems."

Her problems have since accounted in a series of jobs, each with less responsibilities than the one before. They have also strained relationships with family members unable to understand pronounced personality changes and friends who now find her behavior strange. Perhaps most important is Bank's plunging sense of self worth that causes profound personal pain.

"I'll never forget being told (in 1986) that I was significantly intellectually impaired. I miss me myself, who I used to be. It really hurts when people say I look the same. They've forgotten who I really was once. I feel like I've lost my 20s."

Now, "I'm a blend of the person before the accident, the person who witnessed it and the person with the after effects. Trying to explain it is impossible. The more you try, the crazier you sound. There is so much desperation connected to it, getting people to understand."

"A psychologist told me I'm like a sophisticated computer that nobody knows how to use. I'm considered high functioning. I'm very articulate, but that works against me," making it all the more difficult for others to understand or empathize.

"I'm going to need (medical and support) maintenance the rest of my life."

Engaged to be married to an area businessman, Bank was prevented from joining him during an international assignment because of the head injury. "They said I'm not a candidate for overseas residency."



SHARON LAMIEUX/staff photographer

Craig Dankanics of Farmington Hills listens as Jennifer Imlay explains how she would strike out in anger with long fingernails during her lengthy recovery process. She was seriously injured

in an auto accident two years ago and lives in a group home in Beverly Hills.

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SHARON LAMIEUX/staff photographer

Georgi Ann Hammond, a 47-year-old Redford woman injured in an auto accident six months ago, is overcome with emotion during her first encounter with other victims of head injury at a meeting of a support group in Farmington Hills.