

Burke CONNECTION

New Hope for Traumatic Brain Injury Patients

Those with traumatic brain injury face a long battle to regain their identities.

By Amber Healy

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Bob Lane does not remember what happened during his accident. All he knows is what he heard from witnesses after he woke up in the hospital.

"I had been driving on I-95 North when I was hit," he said. "My car rolled over five or six times, but I don't remember any of it."

About a year later, Lane and his wife noticed he was having difficulty remembering things, like where he had left papers he'd printed off his computer, where he put his glasses down or why he entered a room. He also had problems keeping his balance, often falling over without realizing he was falling.

"One day, I was writing stuff down and when I read it again, it didn't make any sense," Lane said. "I knew what I was writing while I was writing it, but if I read it later it was just a jumble of words."

Lane was later diagnosed with traumatic brain injury (TBI), a condition that consists of a variety of symptoms that arise from a hit to the head. Some symptoms, like memory loss or vision problems, are easily overlooked and waved off as another sign of old age, Lane said. However, these symptoms, when looked at comprehensively by a doctor, can indicate something much more serious.

THE TYPE OF damage to Lane's brain is not detectable by an MRI or other brain scan techniques, he said, because the damage is to the brain's electrical and nervous systems. Information is often scrambled or is not stored in the way it should be, he explained, but the problems caused by traumatic brain injury are not the same for every person with the condition.

During one of his hospital visits, he met Dr. Marianne Talbot, founder of the National Rehabilitation and Rediscovery Foundation, and learned about the Hope Project, a series of classes and workshops for people living with traumatic brain injury.

The Hope Project, which began last fall at the Northern Virginia campus of Virginia Tech in Falls Church, consists of four, two-hour class sessions each week. Students of varying ages and ability levels meet to discuss their difficulties and their goals for living more independent lives.

Talbot was inspired to develop the yearlong course after talking with a veteran who just returned from Iraq with a traumatic brain injury, the symptoms of which are sometimes combined with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The course was initially designed to help veterans and military personnel cope with their injuries, but there was a shortage of veterans available for the program, Talbot said.

When the veteran first joined the Hope Project, Lane said he often spoke about what he had seen during the war.

"He didn't socialize the same way with the civilians as he would with other military people," Lane said. "After a while, he realized we wanted to hear about him as a



Photo by Amber Healy/The Connection

The first class of the Hope Project meets at the Falls Church campus of Virginia Tech. From left: Somkhith Vonghakhone, Bob Lane, Marianne Talbot, John Hanley, Khampong Vonghakhone, Steve Michalski and Bill Murray.

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For more information about the National Rehabilitation and Rediscovery Foundation or the Hope Project, go to www.nrrf.us or contact Marianne Talbot at mtalbot@vt.edu.

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person, not about the war all the time."

Talbot decided to integrate the course, focusing more on life skills and individual goals for the time being.

"The military is used to taking care of its own, but eventually we hope there will be some cooperation with civilian groups," she said. None of the students in the first series of classes are active duty military.

Somkhith Vonghakhone of Alexandria comes to class with his mother, Khampong Vonghakhone. He was injured during a car crash on New Year's Eve 2002.

"I didn't have a seatbelt on," Somkhith Vonghakhone said slowly, carefully pronouncing each word. He has trouble remembering people's names and how he knows them.

"I know Marianne and Bob, but I don't remember where I know them from," he said. "I don't remember coming here. It gets annoying when you forget things."

Bill Murray of Falls Church had a sports injury in college, but was able to complete his bachelor's degree in chemistry and math and went on to complete his master's degree in science education. He still teaches from time to time, but he admits that to look at him, a person would never know he has troubles remembering dates or events.

Steve Michalski of Gainesville survived a heart attack 13 months ago. Trained as a surgeon, he has trouble with his short-term memory.

THE NEWEST member of the class, John Hanley of Oakton, had been an analyst for Exxon Mobil for 20 years until a stroke last August.

"I suffered a TBI from the whole ordeal and now I'm trying to pick up some things this semester and continue in the fall so I can learn how I can get better," he said.

The men in the class discuss books they read a few pages at a time, sharing their ideas and re-learning how to remember information in small increments at a time.

Talbot believes the men may be able to notice improvements in each other during the course of the semester better than they could see their own progress, and she is creating a measuring tool to that effect during this final month-long course.

Hanley said it was too early for him to notice any changes, but others said they have seen improvements since the class started last fall, when Virginia Tech provided the National Rehabilitation and Rediscovery Foundation with the in-kind donation of classroom space.

"Just getting on a regular schedule is helpful," Murray said.

Talbot said the group has already taken on one large project, speaking during a commencement exercise at Shenandoah University for a class of occupational therapists.

"We had to write our speeches to answer the questions they would have for us about our injuries," Murray said. "It was challenging, but I don't think anyone was nervous to speak to the group."

As part of the Hope Project and the National Rehabilitation and Rediscovery Foundation's partnership with Shenandoah University, Murray receives some occupational therapy from students who need practice before earning their certification, Talbot said.

In addition to time spent in a traditional classroom, talking about new ways to tackle old, simple tasks, a series of movement classes is offered in Arlington and Alexandria to help traumatic brain injury sufferers regain their balance and improve their flexibility.

The goal for the programs, whether in a classroom or in a mirrored dance studio, is simple, Talbot said.

"With brain injuries, you lose your sense of self," she said. "What we're hoping to do is help people relearn who they are and regain a sense of who they are and who they want to be. Our big question is what do you want to do with your life, and then we try to get the skills and resources together to achieve that goal."



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