

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs • everybody serves

Winter 2015 (Traumatic brain injury)

A View of Prayer Transformed

by Cathleen Holbrook

Hopewell Reformed Church, Hopewell Junction NY

‘I’ll pray for you.’ How many times I have said those words with good intentions, to comfort a friend or encourage an acquaintance going through a hard time. Maybe I said a quick prayer on my way out of church, or when I saw that person again.

Prayer took on an entirely new dimension when our son Andrew, a sophomore at Hope College, was in a car accident in August 2013. His friend, the driver, was killed, and Andrew sustained a severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). As my husband, two daughters, and I raced to the hospital where he lay comatose, we had no idea what was ahead of us. We prayed in desperation on the long flights to Michigan.

In those early days at the hospital we gathered with countless friends and relatives in the family lounge, as TBI patients cannot tolerate stimulation. Two at a time, we crept into his frigid, dark, quiet room to pray for him. On the hospital dry-erase board in his room, the category

“Goals” stood empty. He was so critical that there were no goals. We took the marker and wrote underneath, “God’s Miraculous Healing.”

With every visitor, we prayed around Andrew’s bed holding hands, in the lounge, in the hallway outside his room. Pastors, old friends, new friends, relatives, Andrew’s college buddies, professors, and Hope staff: everyone prayed, and prayed, and prayed.

Andrew came out of his coma after 16 days and went to a rehabilitation hospital for three months of therapy. His first job was learning to hold his head up straight. He relearned how to sit, stand, walk, talk, write, feed himself...everything.

He has returned to living in a dorm at Hope and taking two classes. He works hard every day to compensate for his short-term memory loss; we are proud of his fighting spirit. Each morning I pray, beginning with the words, “Thank you for your miraculous healing.”

When Andrew was still in the hospital, one friend wrote to us about his lifelong battle with insomnia. Whenever he lay awake at night, he prayed for Andrew. After the accident, people from our church in New York held a prayer vigil for Andrew, and they have continued to pray. One of my co-workers, an agnostic, told me that he felt compelled to pray for Andrew. Our cousins in Africa had

their whole community praying for Andrew. What a comfort to know that even as we were sleeping, around the world Andrew was being lifted up in prayer.

Although Andrew's TBI has changed our lives, we continue to trust in God's miraculous healing, and we can see his loving hand in all the good days—and the bad days—that have passed since August 2013. Now when I tell people I will pray for them, I count it a privilege. I will never again say "I'll pray for you" without realizing the incredible power of prayer.

Themes

Winter 2015—Traumatic brain injury (TBI). In this issue, people describe how their life has been impacted by TBI and how the church has responded.

Spring 2015—A Friendship group's impact. How has your church integrated adults from a Friendship group (or similar ministry with people who have intellectual disabilities) into your congregation? **By February 16,** please send us a note describing your experience.

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A Ministry of Presence
by Karin Granberg-Michaelson
RCA Chaplain, Grand Rapids MI

During the past 10 years, I served as a chaplain to 30 persons in group homes who live with severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). My job description was to provide individual support to those who lacked family support or simply needed a friend.

I began my work with biblical stories, sometimes interpreted in music, art, and applications to real life. One fail-proof resource was to sing “Jesus Loves Me.” Over time, however, I realized that this traditional church-school approach was not connecting with several residents; this recognition reshaped our work together.

As a fellow traveler with needs for friendship and intimacy, I began taking cues from each person’s particular strengths and interests. Sometimes that meant helping a resident tell the story of her life by making a scrapbook together, looking through a fashion magazine, or making a puzzle. Other times it meant empathizing with a parent separated from her children. Sometimes I closed our visit with prayer; other times a prayer would have been unnatural.

By experiencing the reciprocal nature of ministry—of giving and receiving—I learned to be fully present in the moment to each person. Since there was no “one size fits all” formula, I needed to develop a unique approach to spending time with each individual.

Forming close relationships with TBI residents transformed my approach to ministry. Communication challenges remained, because some residents were able only to indicate pain or pleasure through blinking their eyes and subtle changes in facial expression. My job in these cases was to tune in to the subtle clues, and sit with them.

Severely impaired speech was another challenging barrier. When a bridge cannot be found between speech and comprehension, either party may stop trying to communicate. Sometimes the best solution was to acknowledge that words were not working and simply to offer affirming touch and be silent together.

The most effective way to share the good news of Jesus and his love with brain-injured children and adults is to be fully present. Do whatever it takes to build a solid connection, learn to be at eye level at all times, speak slowly and clearly, avoid loud or baby talk, give the individual time to respond verbally or nonverbally, and check for comprehension before continuing to talk.

Learning to Trust and Obey

by Glenn Rutgers

Central Wesleyan Church, Holland MI

My son, Joshua, pulled in front of a semi-truck on August 23, 2012. He sustained a broken pelvis (five places),

traumatic brain injury, facial cuts, and a broken arm. Because of fluctuating brain pressure, Josh was placed in an induced coma for nearly three weeks.

A few days after the accident, I felt frustrated because we were not seeing any significant progress. One evening, I left Josh and returned to the hospital family housing where my wife and I were staying. As I processed the events of the last few days, I felt like I was in a dream, alone and sad. I lay on a couch in the tiny living room and started to pray, sing, and cry. I poured out my soul to God. For nearly an hour I asked God many questions regarding the future for Josh and for us, his parents.

In the stillness of the moment, the verse “Be still and know that I am God” came to mind, and I prayed, “Lord, I will be still.” I felt God’s presence in a wonderful way. Then God brought the old song to mind: “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” I wondered what kind of answer that was to my questions, but I prayed, “If that is what you want me to do, I will trust and obey!” Tears welled up in my eyes. God had answered my prayer that night.

The entire family has been impacted by the accident. All five siblings spent time with Josh during his first week in the hospital, traveling from China, Georgia, Illinois, Tennessee, and Michigan. We all found the importance of leaning heavily into God for help and support. Friends

came by our side to encourage and comfort us. We all have grown more aware of how precious and fragile life can be, and we were able to share our faith with other families.

Josh spent a month in the hospital and two more in a rehabilitation hospital. He came home November 1 and took his first steps on (U.S.) Thanksgiving eve. Despite the traumatic brain injury, overall Josh's personality has not changed. He still has a passion for people, likes to laugh, and has the same sense of humor. Some of the dreams he had prior to the accident seem to have taken a back seat, and his short-term memory frustrates him at times.

I believe God spared Joshua's life for a specific reason. When Josh was a child he said that he wanted to be a "missionary to the Eskimos"! He continues to be passionate in helping people. He is involved at Keystone (CRC) in Ada MI, assists leaders of a teen/young adult Bible study, and works at Goodwill Industries. Though the years, we are learning, together, to trust and obey!

Married to a Different Man

by Nancy Yonker

First Christian Reformed Church, Allendale MI

Our lives changed completely on June 6, 2011. While my husband was riding his bike, he was hit by a car going 60 miles per hour. Harold's bruises and broken ankle healed

well, but his traumatic brain injury (TBI) changed him. After six months of rehabilitation, Harold came back to our home, but every evening he wants to go “home” to his parents.

The social worker warned me it would be hard, but I was sure I could do it with help from God and others.

Harold and I were such private people. We did all our own work, but now we need help from many people. Our oldest daughter stays with Harold so that I can meet friends for breakfast and run errands. During the summer, I can work outside when our granddaughter comes over. Men from church built a large, accessible bathroom for us. They fixed wiring, and they split and stacked wood. Many visitors bring goodies, cheer, God’s Word, and prayers.

Harold lost his short-term memory and cannot read anymore. He hates getting washed up, doesn’t want to be shaven, and won’t take out his teeth for brushing. He can’t watch TV because he thinks it’s happening right in our living room, and he thinks the teddy bears on the couch are real babies. He tries to “work” by moving furniture, taking pictures off walls, and playing with the stove.

Even more painful, often he doesn’t know that I’m his wife. Harold knows our children by name but thinks they’re still young. Because Harold cannot be left alone, I have missed grandchildren’s events, church functions, and

more.

Although I'm scared of him when he is combative and verbally abusive, God sends his angels to protect me when I'm in danger. Sometimes the devil torments Harold in his broken brain, and then I tell the devil to leave in Jesus' name.

When we said our marriage vows 59 years ago, I made a commitment to him. Taking care of Harold has brought some joy, but mostly hard work, stress, loneliness, and fear. Once in a while Harold states his love for me, for his children, and for his Savior. How I love to hear his testimony on those good days! Often I play the piano to calm him down, and I love to hear him sing. To my surprise, Harold remembers many stanzas of old hymns and some silly songs, too.

I never know when I wake up in the morning if the day will be bad or good. I give it all to God, and he is with me every step.

A Safe, Supportive Church for All by Sarah Witte

North Blendon Reformed Church, Hudsonville MI

In May 1989, when I was 14, my 38-year-old mother sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI) in a serious auto accident. When Mom came home from the hospital, her

personality had change dramatically. It's odd to have a mom who does not know your schedule, your likes and dislikes, and your personality. My pain was made worse because others could not see this change and thought I should just be happy that my mom was home.

Unfortunately, I did not have a church where I felt safe to turn to with my thoughts and feelings, nor did Mom feel safe at this church.

Fast forward to more recent times: my mom is able to live on her own, but she is impulsive. I thank God that she has learned to consult me with large decisions and purchases. I feel stuck in that sandwich generation of having to keep an eye on my mom and raise my own child, but Mom has received support and love from the last two churches she has attended.

About five years after her accident Mom started attending Third Reformed Church in Grand Rapids MI, and they found a fit for her, personality quirks and all. When she would volunteer for something they were not sure that she could do, they brought someone alongside her to see how things worked out and to mentor her. She was welcome in a small group even though she has short-term memory loss and cannot remember what she studied throughout the week. She cannot be left alone with children but is an awesome nursery assistant. She is like a kid herself in a lot of ways since the accident. She loves to play games and sing songs with the kids, so she helped

with family night and vacation Bible school. More recently she transferred to a church closer to her home (Olivet Reformed/Harbor Life in Grandville MI) and has had the same wonderful experiences there at well.

So what can the church do to assist someone with TBI? The church must recognize that when the family member with TBI comes home, everything may change for the person and for the family. Be there for the family. Appoint a person (or couple or family) to support them through the process, especially if there are children. Give family members a safe place to share their feelings. Stay with the person with TBI so family members can get out once in a while. Remember that a person with TBI may still want to serve, even if not in the capacity as before, so find ways for the person to serve if willing.

When a church is loving, supportive, and helps where needed, the person with TBI and their family receive care, and the church is blessed in return.

Editor's Note

Your Neighbor with TBI

It's tempting to look the other way when there's an overwhelming need that begs a response. For most of the individuals whose stories are published here, turning away was not an option since a traumatic brain injury (TBI) affected an immediate family member.

Churches can respond to a member or family affected by TBI in a variety of ways. Beyond the suggestions offered in this issue, the Winter 2015 publication of RCA Today describes how a Michigan church since 2012 has begun its monthly consistory meetings with 45 minutes of devotions across the street at a residential facility for people with brain and spinal cord injuries.

“Here’s a group of people that are kind of on the margins of society—people forget about them,” says Al Shoemaker, who just finished a term as elder at Immanuel Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. “They’re kind of tucked away. We’re right next door. These are literally our neighbors.”

The visits—which include singing, biblical reflection, prayer time, and social interaction—are popular with residents and with consistory members. To read how this engagement in local mission has shaped the meetings after devotions, go to www.rca.org/news/hope-next-door.

Who’s across the street from your church and from your home, and in what ways are you a neighbor to them?

—Terry A. DeYoung

More Online

Due to space limitations in the print newsletter, additional information for these Breaking Barriers articles, plus a letter to the editor, can be found online (www.crcna.org/disability and www.rca.org/disability).

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