

Student starts head injury support group

By KIM BAXTER
Collegian Staff Writer

Late last July, Tom Byrnes experienced a brush with death — suffering head trauma in an alcohol-related auto accident that rendered him comatose and in critical condition.

Byrnes (sophomore-forest science) emerged from the coma in nine days, but his subsequent rehabilitation lasted more than a year. After a one-month hospital stay, he attended cognitive, vocational, speech and psychological therapy daily until his release from rehab this August.

The experience, Byrnes said, has made him more mature. "I'm 21, but I'm 30," said the grateful Byrnes, who has started a support group for people with head injuries and their families at the Nittany Valley Rehabilitation Hospital, 550 W. College Ave. in Pleasant Gap.

Byrnes said the support group's monthly meetings at the hospital have three objectives: to educate and raise public awareness about preventing head injuries, to support survivors and their families and to advocate legislation which may lessen the occurrence of head injuries and benefit survivors.

Each survivor requires between \$4.1 million and \$9 million for rehabilitation over a lifetime, according to a bulletin from the Keystone State Head Injury Foundation.

The Pepper Commission, a U.S. Senate committee, is studying the problems of people with head injuries and is expected to recommend legislation within the next six months, said Joe Geiger, KSHIF executive director.

Geiger will speak about the new local group at an informational holiday dinner-meeting for people with head injuries and their families at Toftrees, 1 Country Club Lane, on Dec. 14.

Geiger said he will discuss goals for 1990, including a news-

paper clipping file of accidents that will be used to prove the need for legislation, and early intervention teams to help families cope with the initial shock of the head injury.

Technological advancements in the last 10 years have increased the number of survivors from accidents involving head injuries, Geiger said. However, rehabilitation has not improved at the same pace and remains a very slow, expensive process, he said.

"Government is now becoming aware that the elderly are not the only members of society requiring long-term, costly medical care," he said.

The Head Injury Foundation bulletin notes 1 million head injuries are suffered in the United States each year. And head injuries kill more Americans under the age of 44 than all other causes of death combined. Half of these are the result of motor vehicle crashes and two-thirds of all victims are men under 35.

The resulting medical problems can include dizzy spells, impaired coordination, behavioral and personality changes, and disorientation, said Judy Cywilko, director of head trauma services at the Nittany Valley facility.

Byrnes recovered by not giving up hope and keeping a photo album and other familiar items by his side. These items can help a confused victim during his or her stay in rehab, as they provide security and comfort, he said.

Byrnes said he will never be able to fully function like he did before the accident.

"My biggest problem is finding the right words in conversation," he said, adding that he has a slight speech impediment — a "lazy tongue" he calls it.

But Byrnes is essentially recovered, participating in all the activities he did before the accident. Cywilko said Byrnes is an inspirational success story.