

Driven To The Edge

When he was five-years-old, Tom Byrnes would not go to his kindergarten class unless he was wearing a tie. He insisted on wearing one for about two months. "Can you imagine what it was like for me to find ties this small?" laughs his mother, Rence Byrnes, holding her hands about six inches apart.

For Byrnes, this type of discipline was only the beginning. He also loved charts as a child. Mrs. Byrnes would make a chart of duties for Tom, his brother John and sister Thressia to complete during the week. "Tom always checked off his duties and completed the chart," says Mrs. Byrnes.

To this day, Byrnes still makes lists for himself. Between waking up early and going to bed, his day is mapped out with specific activities such as working, lifting, running, and helping out mom at home. Mrs. Byrnes gave him a list at the beginning of the summer, and she knows he'll complete it. Byrnes always has a project and possesses a driven quality that gets the job done. "He doesn't like to go through a day unless he's done something constructive," says Mrs. Byrnes.

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Described by his mother and friends as driven, bordering on aggressive, this 22-year-old man with light brown hair, fair skin, and hazel eyes emanates the word determination. "If you want something you've got to almost taste it to want it," Byrnes says, clenching his fist toward his heart.

During the summer of 1988, Byrnes completed a six-week course in the Officers Candidate School for the United States Marine Corps in Quantico, VA, which gave him the challenge he has always lived for. His major life goal was to become a pilot for the United States Navy. "My dad was an officer in the US Navy and flew jets and I wanted to do that also," says Byrnes.

Mrs. Byrnes believes that this determination has a lot to do with his father, John Byrnes. He was killed in Vietnam while completing his Third Tour of Duty in 1969 when tom was 18 months old. "I think in the back of Tom's mind, he wants his father's approval in some way," says Mrs. Byrnes.

Ten days after completing OCS, Byrnes' regimented, goal-oriented life came to a halt. A combination of poor judgement, impulsiveness and alcohol led him to be involved in a near-fatal auto accident that left him comatose with a closed head injury, suffering global aphasia—one of the most severe of head injuries.

Byrnes' injury caused the total loss of his ability to understand or use words or symbols, causing a language disturbance that affected his comprehension, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, gesturing and numerical calculating. Byrnes had to put aside his life of order and literally relive the past 20 years.

Byrnes attended extensive therapy for one year after his accident to recover the everyday skills he lost due to his injury. "I can't imagine how many hours he put in with me," says Rozanne Gross, Byrnes' speech therapist at Harmarville Rehabilitation Center in Pittsburgh, PA, located five miles from his home. "We literally started with one word on the page."

Gross attributes Byrnes' recovery to a combination of hard work and a miracle. "Tom is not your typical recovery," says Gross. According to a bulletin from the Keystone State Head Injury Foundation, each head injury survivor will require 5 to 10 years of rehabilitation to recover.

Byrnes also suffered Post Traumatic Amnesia, a type of Amnesia that resulted with altered consciousness. To link him to his past, Mrs. Byrnes made a book for him which included pictures of everyone he knew and all of the places he had been. Along with the love and support of family and friends, Byrnes was able to get through the rough times.

His determination and hard work enabled him to return to Penn State to complete his life-time goals.

The Service, having always been a challenge and a goal in Byrnes' life, became even more important upon returning to Penn State. Because of his injury, Byrnes will never be able to fly planes for the Service but his goal of becoming an officer for the United States Marine Corps is still in the back of his mind and within his grasp. "I wanted to be a Marine," says Byrnes, "and fulfill my goal: get an education."

Unfortunately, after missing one year of school, Byrnes was disenrolled from the USMC but knew he still wanted to be an officer and fulfill his goal. Education became his priority when he returned to Penn State in the fall of 1989.

"You've got to take it one day at a time," says Byrnes. Regimentation had found its way back into his life. "I had to budget my time well," he says, "Study, lift, run, that was it." Putting 100 percent into everything he did had always been in Byrnes' character but with school his first year back proved that determination. He completed his first year with a 3.0 cumulative average.

Returning to school was significant accomplishment in Byrnes' recovery, yet another aspect entered into his life and has become essential in his recovery.

Last fall, while playing frisbee on the White golf course with his dog Sam, Byrnes met Susan Gerhard, a physical therapist from the Nittany Valley Rehabilitation Hospital. Once they started talking they realized they had something in common. Gerhard invited Byrnes to a dinner at Toftrees held by the Keystone State Head Injury

Foundation. At the dinner, Joe Gieger, executive director of the KSHIF, expressed the need for a head injury support group in the Nittany Valley/Central Pennsylvania region. Byrnes was one of the few at the dinner to volunteer and has been a major contributor and supporter to the group ever since.

"I ended up pretty good," says Byrnes of his injury, "I want to help other survivors get to where I am, because I know how it is. It's a tough time for the families, I was so lucky." Byrnes and the group are still working toward three major goals: to advocate legislation, to create public awareness and educate the effects of head injury, and to provide assistance and support to the survivors and their families.

"Tom is full of energy, full of ideas and enthusiasm," says Judy Cywilko, former program director of the head injury support group at the Nittany Valley Rehabilitation Hospital. "He's done very well as a survivor, is always giving his best by being consistently committed to the group."

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"He impressed me early as a very affectionate person," says Roxanne Gross, "he would hug patients for support when he wasn't able to talk."

Mrs. Byrnes describes her son as "peppered with gentleness." "He's the first one to help someone, always." Being genuine and honest are other qualities Byrnes lives by. "I try to think about things before I say them but sometimes I just say it," he says, "Sometimes I'm too honest."

Thinking about things before he does them is a change Byrnes' has acquired since his accident two years ago. Even as a child, Byrnes was always daring. "If I told him not to do something," explains Mrs. Byrnes, "He would do it."

When he was just little enough to reach the bathroom sink, about three years old, he got up and splashed water on the light bulbs which, in turn, caused them to explode. "He was told never to do it," says Mrs. Byrnes, "but he did."

Before the accident Byrnes was always the first to try things. He possessed a "living on the edge" quality according to Mrs. Byrnes. His good friends from high school and college describe him as fun to be with and wild. "Basically we liked to raise hell," says Kraig Stetzer, Byrnes' roommate at Penn State.

It was this "on the edge" quality that led Byrnes to take

the dare of climbing on top of the van, with a close high school buddy, that threw him and took away his goals and everything he had in life in the summer of 1988. "I was impulsive. If I wanted to do something, I would just do it; I wouldn't think about it."

Byrnes has recovered all the abilities he possessed before his accident due to his fierce determination. His driven, impulsive attitude has also found its way back into his life; although now to a lesser degree. "I'm not as wild and crazy as before," explains Byrnes.

The philosophy that has kept his life in order is something that the Officers Candidate School taught Byrnes and he has lived by it ever since: If you believe in something you really want to do, you can do it. No one can stop you and no one is better than you.

NOTE: This article was written by Ms. Julie Farren during the Fall 1990 semester. Tom has changed his major to GNAS effective Fall 1991 and plans to graduate in the Summer of '92.

Ms. Farren graduated in December of 1990 with a BA degree in English. She wrote this article while she was a student at Penn State.

If you have had a head injury and are interested in an on-campus support group designed to help you be a better student, please contact Bill Ritzman at 863-0465 or Tom Byrnes at 867-7354.