

Head injury survivor inspires others

Support group works to help similar victims

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Thomas Byrnes is lucky to be alive. Byrnes (senior-general arts and sciences) survived a traumatic head injury due to an alcohol-related car accident two years ago, leaving his family little hope of his recovery. His mother was told that he may not last more than 72 hours, and Byrnes was given his last rites.

But after lying in a coma for more than a week, spending one year in intensive therapy and another year piecing his life back together, Byrnes is very much alive. And he has something to say.

Byrnes heads a support group for survivors of traumatic head injuries and their families, which is based at the Nittany Valley Rehabilitation Hospital.

The Centre Region Head Injury Support Group meets the second Thursday of each month and provides assistance and support to survivors and their families. The group also tries to educate the public about head injuries and is lobbying the Pennsylvania State Legislature in support of bicycle helmet laws.

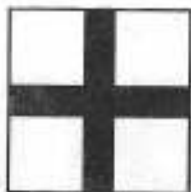
"They (survivors) don't want to come forward because there is nothing there for them," Byrnes said.

He said that when he returned to Penn State just one year after his accident, he needed more time to take exams and help from University tutors. But the University couldn't provide the social networking Byrnes needed.

The intention of the support group is to provide University students with a social foundation for coping with everyday life. The group will also act as a "sharing and caring" support system, where survivors can share and learn from one another's experiences.

When Byrnes came out of his coma, he suffered amnesia and global aphasia — the

Personalities



Thomas
Byrnes

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loss or impairment of power to use words as symbols of ideas.

"When Tom's accident happened, it was like the other shoe fell . . . The worst thing that could happen happened," said his mother, Renee Byrnes.

But Renee Byrnes said Tom was very determined, and she never gave up hope.

"I never thought he would die, even when they were trying to say that to me," she said. But the prognosis wasn't good. "Until the fourth or fifth day, the doctors only said doom and gloom."

But after almost a week, the neurologist finally had good news, Renee Byrnes said.

In fact, Dr. Julian Bailes, who performed brain surgery on Byrnes, said Byrnes had only a 5 percent chance of recovering to the extent that he has. Bailes said 50 to 75 percent of patients who sustain head injuries die, let alone make a recovery like his.

Byrnes, who spent two weeks in intensive care, was transferred from the Allegheny General Hospital to Harmarville Rehabilitation Center 3½ weeks after his accident. Then his road to recovery began with speech, vocational, occupational and cognitive therapy every day for a year. His doctors were unavailable for comment.

Byrnes, who did not sustain any other bodily injuries, had physical therapy which lasted a week. The second time he went running, he outran his physical therapist and was performing military maneuvers in the woods, Byrnes' said.

"We think he thought that he was in some kind of a prison camp," she said.

He was a reluctant patient and is proud to say that he tried escaping Harmarville twice. His doctor chased him the first time and needed physical therapy himself for a week after the incident, Byrnes said with a laugh.

"I had no idea why I was there," Byrnes said. "They had to let me go because I escaped so many times."

Now, two years after his accident, Byrnes has almost completely regained all skills.

He reluctantly admitted he still has trouble communicating thoughts into sentences. He has difficulty finding the right words to express ideas.

Byrnes said he also suffers what he calls a "lazy tongue," but he says he is just negligent and doesn't regularly practice speaking.

Byrnes, who is determined to become a special agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Reserve, also said it takes him about two to three times longer to read and comprehend homework assignments.

He said his first semester back, which he earned a 3.0 grade point average, his life was "eating, sleeping, studying, lifting and running." He said that he didn't have a social life.

"I wanted to show that I wasn't messed up from the accident," he said, adding that he doesn't want sympathy. "I learned a lot about life the hard way. It made me stop and think and smell the coffee and realize that I'm damn lucky I'm alive."

Determination was the key factor in his recovery, Byrnes said.

"He is very determined in everything he does. He's got to do the best. If he wants something he'll get it," said Julie Farren, Byrnes' close friend and a 1990 University graduate.

"He went through a lot and I think he could help a lot of people," Farren said.

Byrnes is a good role model for head injury survivors, said Joe Geiger, executive director for the Keystone State Head Injury Foundation.

Geiger said many mistakenly think a rural place like Centre County has less risk for head injuries than large metropolitan areas.



Collegian Photo/Michael Kubel

Thomas Byrnes, who survived a traumatic head injury, pets his dog. Byrnes said he is lucky to be alive after an alcohol-related car accident placed him in the hospital in a coma.

If Beaver Stadium was filled eight times, that's how many people have sustained head injuries that have left permanent disabilities among Pennsylvanians alone, Geiger said.

Geiger said males from the ages 16 to 24 are the highest risk group for head injuries.

"One of the saddest things in my job is seeing the young men who are 22 or so and had such high aspirations and will never reach their potential because of a head injury," Geiger said. "Not one of them thought it would happen to them."

Byrnes is the youngest head injury support group leader out of 45 groups in Pennsylvania, Geiger said.

"I'm lucky enough to be alive. God put me on this earth for a reason," Byrnes said. "I want to provide help because I'm lucky enough to be here . . . And I want other survivors to be where I am."