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• Choosing to go Back to Work
• Walk For Thought
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The mission of the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance is to raise awareness and enhance the quality of life for all people affected by brain injury.

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Summer 2023
Welcome *Mind Matters* readers,

As we step into the scorching embrace of the hottest month of the year, I warmly welcome each and every one of you, offering a refreshing glass of lemonade as respite from the blazing sun. August in Minnesota might be a challenging environment, but many people with brain injury have faced an equally challenging environment: the workplace. In this issue, we delve into the topic of navigating the challenges of returning to work after a brain injury.

We recognize the vital role that employment plays in fostering independence, confidence, and overall well-being. That’s why we are committed to providing support and resources to individuals navigating this often complex and nuanced process.

In this issue, we shine a light on the experiences and insights of individuals who have successfully returned to work after a brain injury. Individuals like Samantha Strandberg and Jon Casey. We sit down with both of them to talk about their brain injuries and how they affected their transitions back to the police force. We also hear from Jim Richardson, as he talks to several of our go-to experts for advice on regaining your professional life. From adaptive technology and workplace accommodations to the crucial role of rehabilitation and vocational support, Resource Facilitation offers many ideas and avenues for returning to employment.

We also honor employers who have demonstrated exemplary commitment to creating inclusive and supportive work environments for individuals with brain injuries. We hope to inspire employers to embrace diversity and provide opportunities for individuals who have experienced brain injuries to thrive in the workplace.

Additionally, I am thrilled to announce our upcoming 2023 Walk for Thought, which will take place on Saturday, September 16 in New Brighton and Duluth. This annual event serves as a celebration of the resilience and strength of the Minnesota brain injury community. Join us as we come together to raise awareness, support one another, and honor the incredible journeys of individuals who have faced the challenges of brain injuries. Whether you choose to participate in person or virtually, your involvement will make a meaningful impact. Mark your calendars for Saturday, September 16 and visit our website at braininjurymn.org to register, donate and learn more about the 2023 Walk for Thought.

As we approach the end of the year, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for your continued support. Your generosity enables us to provide essential services, education, and advocacy for those affected by brain injuries. Together, we can create a society that values and supports the journey of returning to work after a brain injury.

Thank you for being an integral part of our community. Thank you also to our contributing writers. I encourage you to read our Public Policy update to learn more about getting involved in local legislation as well as Mike Strand’s regular column for an intimate look at aging with brain injury. Let us embrace this change and growth, knowing that we are united in our commitment to making a positive difference.

Warm regards,

David King

CEO
Regaining Consciousness

By Mike Strand

It’s been over thirty years since I “awoke” out of my coma, I still don’t feel like I’ve regained full consciousness. For most people, consciousness is like a light. It’s either “on” or “off.” Early in the morning or late at night is a period of sleepiness, but that’s it.

People often think of coming out of a coma as “waking up.” It rarely happens that fast. What usually occurs is that one tends to become more responsive to external stimuli over time. By time, I mean days. Eventually, your family is told that you are becoming more responsive. Eventually, you are determined to be out of the coma-state.

I believe that there is a finer line that can be drawn. I have felt that for the last thirty years I have been in varying degrees of fog. I have always felt difficulty being fully aware of my surroundings. I find it curious when I do feel fully “in the moment.” People talk about being “in the zone.” Those times when one is fully focused on their task at hand. It’s all a matter of degree. When I feel in the zone, it simply means that I feel pretty confident that things are as they appear to me.

Fairly often, that degree of presence is a faint hope that I enjoy only infrequently. Most of the time, I am merely winging it as I go through my day.

Like our grandparents being less here, than in their own inner world.

Now, as I feel the years upon me, my struggle is not to become more coherent, but to hang on to whatever awareness I manage to enjoy each day. It is not a stark difference, but I can feel my consciousness, my feeling of presence, slipping away.

When my daily fatigue builds, I strive to remain fully present. My bad days are becoming more frequent. My good days are becoming shorter in length.

Some people have vivid dreams and dream worlds. I know that I dream, but I can scarcely recall them. I know that I am awake, but oftentimes I can scarcely recall that, either. It is hard to remember something that you weren’t fully present for in the first place.

The clever brain, injured or not, creates a coherent whole that makes sense. I find that my coherent whole is based on a much greater economy of actual occurrences, than that of other folks. Oftentimes, when recounting an event, or a doctor’s appointment, my recollections seem composed of half vague, and half connected notions.

For the sake of sanity, I don’t attach my happiness or self-worth to any of this. I can smile and care about my friends and loved ones. Maybe this is the danger of Pride. If I base my pride on my ability to be sharp and with it, I will be unhappy.

I must remember that true happiness comes from within, and is not dependent on outside circumstances. Sure, it can be affected by things that happen in the world, but my own inner happiness can always rise above that. Too bad it isn’t as easy as it sounds. The whole world would be smiling if it were!
A t first glance, Samantha Strandberg and Jon Casey seem like polar opposites. A police officer in her late twenties, Samantha is several generations removed from Jon, a retired police officer comfortably in (let’s say) his older years. Samantha’s conversation is tinged with the intensity of fresh experience while Jon speaks, more often than not, with the calm of a man who’s had the time to reflect on his struggles and victories. Almost everything, from their family histories to their personal outlooks, mark them as incompatible individuals.

And yet, brain injury, as we all know, can be a great uniter. Samantha and Jon both received their brain injuries while on-duty as law enforcement officers in Twin Cities suburbs. Both were the victims of perpetrators they were attempting to bring in. And both have made it their goals educate the public about their experiences.

I first met Jon ten years ago. In 1996, he’d been attacked with a metal chair leg while on duty with the Anoka Police Department and sustained severe injuries, including having a skull fragment embedded in his brain. His resulting brain injury led to surgery, a lengthy hospital stay, as well as physical and emotional challenges. Although he returned to work and eventually retired after 30 years on the force, Jon’s experiences changed his life so much that he joined our Speakers Bureau in order to share his experiences with the public and educate others on the impact brain injury can have on your life.

“I’d arrest people,” Jon says, “and a lot of times I’d be sitting there doing my paperwork and I’d ask, ‘Have you ever had a brain injury?’ Because I’m just curious. Not surprisingly, so many people in the backseat of my squad car in handcuffs say, ‘Yeah, I got beat up or thrown out of a truck and I was drunk.’ Or women would say, ‘My boyfriend would come home drunk and beat me up every night and knock me out.’ I’d hear all these different stories about people who had brain injury. And I think our jails and our prisons are probably full of people who have made bad choices because of brain injury.”
Samantha, like Jon, received her brain injury in the line of duty. On July 31, 2021, while working as a patrol officer for the City of Lakeville Police Department, Samantha responded to a call regarding an individual who was known for drinking and driving. She went in search of the individual, but lost track of him. Later that night, Samantha received information that the individual had returned. While heading back to the downtown area, she entered a roundabout at 202nd and Holyoke. Unaware that the individual was approaching from the south, Samantha’s vehicle was struck at 120 mph, resulting in her injury.

“It was very weird,” she says. “Not only to have that happen to me, but to have it happen by the same person that I was looking for.”

Samantha’s car was cut almost completely in half. Everything inside her vehicle tore loose, including her rifle which slammed into her head, causing further injury. In the days that followed, Samantha suffered from headaches, extreme pain in her legs and shoulder, sleep difficulties, nightmares, and constant worry. Medical diagnoses revealed a traumatic brain injury, bulging back discs, and tearing in her neck and shoulder. She struggled with balance, depth perception, and visual functioning, affecting her ability to perform her job as a police officer.

However, Samantha was determined to return to work. “I want to work,” she says. “I’m a cop, I want to go back and be with my team. I don’t want to look like I’m just sitting around.”

Both Jon and Samantha acknowledge, however, that their return to work experiences might have been overhasty.

“Law enforcement really wasn’t on top of things as far as how to deal with officers who had brain injuries,” Jon says. His sentiment reflects a broader issue within society, where brain injuries are often overlooked and misunderstood, even today. Jon admitted, “I kind of looked at my brain injury as a broken bone. But there were just so many things that were just off. Two days after my injury after getting back to work. I was at a bar fight, had a beer bottle thrown at my head. And I’m thinking, okay, maybe I should take more time off. You know, like, if I had any common sense, I would’ve, but I didn’t. I went right back to work, right back to being a patrolman. And I just felt off.”

Samantha echoes this, “I never really knew about the brain injury until after I was already released from the hospital when I had all these symptoms that were just unexplained. It’s not like I had a broken arm or whatever. It was this internal injury that nobody could see. And people couldn’t understand what I was going through.”

Samantha’s return to work was a gradual process. She’d had her nighttime driving privileges revoked for almost a year, limiting her mobility. She started with two-hour increments of light duty and slowly increased her hours. However, she continued to face difficulties due to her brain injury.

“I couldn’t multitask at all,” she explains. “So, I couldn’t run plates while I was driving.”

Because of her family history, Samantha found herself looking to her coworkers and friends for support; she was fortunate to have a coworker who had experienced a traumatic brain injury and became a valuable resource for her. Jon, however, had a vast family network to draw on and his wife played a pivotal role in his recovery.

“Family is incredible,” he says. “Nobody understands a brain injury other than family members or somebody that’s been affected by it.” He repeatedly emphasizes the importance of compassionate family members, friends, or colleagues who can provide understanding and empathy for someone who’s had a brain injury.

Samantha became a passionate advocate for drunk and distracted driving awareness, leading to her working with Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD). MADD nominated Samantha for a Hero Award, which gave her the opportunity to share her story with an audience of receptive listeners.
“I hate public speaking. I absolutely despise it,” she says. “I remember standing up onstage and my heart rate was like 120,” she says, “and just speaking to a roomful of cops, which made it a little bit better. And from there, everything kind of kicked off and I’m heavily involved in MADD, I speak at all their impact panels, and I’m heavily involved in Towards Zero Deaths (TZD).”

Towards Zero Deaths is a partnership between the Minnesota Departments of Public Safety, Transportation, and Health and the University of Minnesota. The State’s main traffic safety program, TZD uses an interdisciplinary approach to reduce roadway deaths and serious injuries with its mission to create a culture where traffic fatalities and serious injuries are no longer acceptable.

One day, during a Crisis Intervention Team training session for work, Samantha heard Jon speak about his experiences with brain injury.

“I remember him sitting there and talking during the brain injury segments. And, I remember getting up and crying. And having to walk out because everything
that Jon was talking about was like what I felt like I was living with at that time. And, he’s the reason that I reached out to the Brain Injury Alliance. He’s the reason that I give all these speeches, because I remember how it made me feel having somebody who understood. And he’s in all of my speeches. Every time I give a speech his name is in there talking about that experience. And that was like the turning point in being able to talk to other people about my experience. Even though I hate it because I feel like it re-victimizes me, I feel like it’s been a part of my recovery process.”

Samantha eventually presented her story at the 2023 Conference for Professionals in Brain Injury last March. Her presentation was a huge success, as she related her journey in full uniform to an attentive audience. And yet, despite the fact that Jon had served as her inspiration, they had never had the opportunity to actually sit down and talk. Outside a brief handshake at the initial training session, Samantha and Jon hadn’t even really met.

Sitting together for the first time in the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance office, Jon wipes tears from his eyes.

“I’ve spoken to different groups,” he says, “and when I get emotional people say, ‘Why do you do this to yourself?’ And I say, ‘Because, if it helps one person...”

“That’s what I think law enforcement needs,” he continues. But, Jon wants to emphasize that he doesn’t feel his story in particular sets him apart. It’s unique because it’s personal, but many cops experience similar incidents and lack an outlet to discuss them. “I’m not conceited,” he laughs, “But I think a lot of cops are dealing with this.”

“I don’t feel like my story is very important,” Samantha says, “because it was this dark time in my life. But for other people it’s inspiring and helpful for them that you can come out on the other side. Because, being told by all these doctor’s that you’ll never be a cop again, you know, that this is who you’re gonna be now. I remember thinking, I can’t do that. I can’t live with migraines and headaches and all of these other things and all the doctor’s appointments and stuff. I remember thinking like I cannot do this. So I think for me, that’s been the most rewarding part, all the people that come up to you after saying this the first time that I felt that I know somebody that actually had to go through what I did. And that’s how I felt with Jon. And then a week after that class, I was finally approved for these occipital nerve injections. And that was like the complete turning point in my progress. Like, it took away all my migraines, it blocked all the receptors so that I could like function again. And that was like the biggest turning point in my progress.”

Between the two of them, across the years and generations, you can see the light of two kindred spirits finally come together.

“I feel like we’ve known each other forever,” says Jon. “She’s a kid and I’m an old veteran but we’re both cops. Well, I’m an ex-cop and her brain injury is different from my brain injury and, in a lot of ways, you can’t compare the two, but I feel like we’ve known each other forever.”

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If you believe in a Minnesota where everyone recognizes brain injury and its effects; where all individuals living with brain injury are encouraged to realize their full potential; and where the greater community recognizes the intrinsic value of all people living with a TBI, we hope you will give to the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance today.

Over the past three years, the MNBIA has expanded its reach by offering online options for many of its services. Our teams worked hard to make sure that Minnesotans had access to opportunities and supports whether they were in our offices or at home.

We would like to make sure these opportunities remain available across Minnesota and, to help ensure that, we need you more than we ever have before.

Please donate to the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance today. A gift of $50, $100, $250, or whatever is meaningful to you, can help us continue to offer educational opportunities, advocacy training, and volunteer training. YOU make a difference when you include us in your gift giving. Please, donate online at braininjurymn.org/donate.

Thank you for your commitment to the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance and for your continued support!
UPCOMING EVENTS 2023/2024

SEPT 16 2023
2023 Walk for Thought

OCT 14 2023
Fall Consumer Family Conference

NOV 2023
Minnesota Statewide Stroke Conference

APRIL 25 & 26 2024
38th Annual Brain Injury Conference

MAY 2024
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Visit these websites for more upcoming events.

www.strokemn.org
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Recovering from a brain injury may require answering questions we weren’t expecting. What therapies could help? Changes at home? How to pay surprise bills? Can I drive? Returning to work may lead to several question-marks: When? Same job or different? Full-time or part-time? Will I need accommodations? Should I do this myself, or ask for help?

My friend experienced a life-changing brain injury as a teen. With medical help, he embarked on a journey of schooling, apprenticeship, eventual mastery, and a successful career.

“I had to want it enough,” he said. “Praying helped me, too.” People travel various roads.

Kristina Rauenhorst is a “go-to” resource for us. She’s a career counselor with Minnesota’s Vocational Rehabilitation Services. She helps people go back to or find new work.

“Together, we try to assess a person’s ‘new normal,’” she said. “Often, what someone knew before is still there, but the path to that knowledge might be different. Sometimes, we can use assistive technology to find what works. Trial-and-error is often possible. Also, what accommodations have you made in your daily life? Can they be transferred to the job?”

What if someone decides to change careers? Kristina said, “I like to ask, ‘What is your dream job, and why?’ Then we work on how to get there.”

Larry is a metallurgical engineer. In 1995, he started his own company. Two years ago, a car crash brought his career to a screeching halt, from 80 hours a week to zero in a flash. A half-year ago, he resumed working part-time, with full-time his goal by year’s end. Larry is a client in the Resource Facilitation Program.

As his own boss, Larry has some obvious advantages, but also common challenges. For example, Kristina advises that mental health is as important as physical health.

“I agree 100 percent,” Larry said. “I came to a point where I was unhappy not working. Working is necessary for my mental health. Fortunately, my wife is very supportive. She knew I would get better by working again.”

Two accommodations — flexibility in time and flexibility in expectations, both his own and others — have smoothed bumps along Larry’s road. “My co-workers have been fantastic,” he said. “I’m not sure I could have done it without their support and encouragement.”

Erin works at U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 2019, she took a spill while water skiing, experiencing a concussion. Erin is a client of Resource Facilitator Carla Berardi. “Carla was the first person I talked to who understood what I was going through,” Erin said. “She became my Number One partner, my cheerleading coach.”

The Traumatic Brain Injury Outpatient Program of Hennepin Healthcare also was instrumental in Erin’s navigation back to work. “My speech-therapist was my cognitive coach,” said Erin, who needed three accommodations. The speech-therapist and a physicians’ assistant wrote a letter specifying them: Re-training, periodic 10-minute breaks, and special eyeglasses and adaptations of her computer monitor.

Erin wanted to support herself as a working citizen. “I knew I needed to try,” she said. “I needed support, and I got it.” She returned gradually, from part-time to full-time. “Supportive colleagues also made a humongous difference in my recovery,” she said. That was three-plus years ago. Last summer, Erin was promoted, another success story!

Erin and Larry’s advice: Be patient.

“Healing is not linear,” Erin said. “Sometimes it’s zig-zaggy. Don’t make assumptions.”

Larry’s recommendation for employees: “Take your time.” And for employers: “Give the person time.”

Another “go-to” resource is Cindy Tarshish, the director of ADA Minnesota, which is a program within the Metropolitan Center for Independent Living and is affiliated with the Great Lakes ADA Center. She helps people comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

“Individuals with disabilities, especially non-apparent disabilities, are often unsure how and when to disclose their disabilities and what the ‘reasonable accommodation’ process involves,” Cindy said. “Many are concerned, even 32 years after the signing of the ADA, that they will put their jobs in jeopardy. I try to start the interactive process early with key players — the employee, the supervisor, Human Resources and/or the ADA coordinator — while ensuring that all information remains confidential. Anyone can reach out to me, at no charge, at cindyt@mcll-mn.org, 651-603-2015, 866-630-9793, or MN Relay 711.”

Cindy’s advice: “Know your rights and responsibilities under the ADA, and learn the resources available, both local and national — for example, the Disability Hub MN (866-333-2466) and the Job Accommodation Network (800-526-7234).”

And Kristina’s advice: “Reach out. Don’t get discouraged. There are many supports available. Life is precious. Let’s make the most of it.”

My advice? Take these experts’ advice.

Resource Facilitation is a free, two-year telephone support program that provides education and connection to supports and services to assist people throughout Minnesota in navigating life after brain injury. Participants receive scheduled calls over a two-year period to help problem-solve issues and identify resources to help them transition back to family life, work, school, and the community while achieving the greatest level of independence as possible. Individuals can be referred by a professional or self-refer at any time. Call us at 612-378-2742 or 800-669-6442.
Interpersonal Violence and Traumatic Brain Injury:

Interpersonal and domestic violence are public health crises affecting the United States and leading causes of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). It is estimated that 36 percent of domestic violence survivors have sustained head, neck, or face injuries. Unfortunately, the connection between interpersonal violence and traumatic brain injury remains an under-researched topic. A better understanding of the connection between interpersonal violence and early intervention can reduce negative outcomes for those who sustain a TBI through violence or perhaps even prevent it.

While data is limited, trends on this topic are apparent. It is estimated that over 25 percent of TBIs are caused by interpersonal violence. Certain individuals and communities are also at an increased risk of TBI due to interpersonal violence. Domestic violence disproportionately affects Native American and Black women living in the United States making equity an essential focus in exploring violence and TBI. People with disabilities are also more likely to experience violence, continuing the cycle. Understanding these facts can help guide the work ahead.

Recently, there has been a national initiative by US Senator Cortez Masto that aims to create a national database for TBI prevalence. While this bill did not ultimately pass, it began the conversation about the government’s role in supporting domestic violence survivors experiencing TBIs. There are currently no specific policies or programs in Minnesota to address the prevalence of brain injury caused by violence, though the same trends exist.

During the 2023 legislative session, the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance Public Policy Department committed to pursuing policy options that increase the effectiveness of efforts to reduce interpersonal violence. There is much to be done and the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance is committed to exploring ways to research, educate, and improve the outcomes for those who sustain brain injuries through violence. If you are interested in learning more or sharing ideas, please contact Cynthia at cynthiac@braininjurymn.org.

“Joy’s Bill” Passes Minnesota Legislature

Joy Rindels-Hayden, 87 and long-term Alliance Citizen Advocate, was able to see her vision become reality this past May when her multi-year effort to enhance transit bus driver safety training was passed into law. In January of 2017 Joy suffered a stroke caused by a brain bleed from a fall when she exited the bus on a snowy day. Her walker wheels got hung up at an impossible angle by a ramp that could not properly deploy due to snow piled up at the bus stop and she fell backwards onto Chicago Ave.

After a 17-day hospital stay she quickly determined that the accident was preventable and teamed up with the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance to craft a bill to help prevent this from happening to anybody else. Joy’s persistence, determination and focus on a solution demonstrate how people can actually make a difference sharing their story and getting involved in the political process.
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1) Enable scanning on your device if needed.
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5) This will open the link in a web browser.
The moment we’ve all been waiting for is almost here! It’s time to register yourself or your team, and get excited because the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance’s highly anticipated Walk for Thought is just around the corner. This is the event that brings the Minnesota Brain Injury community together to celebrate, support, and uplift one another. It’s a day of joy, unity, and making a positive impact.

The Walk for Thought is more than just a walk. It’s a gathering of individuals who are passionate about raising awareness for brain injury. It’s a chance to connect with others who understand and share similar experiences. It’s an opportunity to show support for the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance and its mission of raising awareness and enhancing the quality of life for all people affected by brain injury.

Whether you’re a survivor, a family member, a friend, or simply someone who wants to make a difference, this is your moment. Join us as we walk, in the Twin Cities (in New Brighton) or Duluth, towards a brighter future. Each step you take, each smile you share, and each dollar you raise will directly contribute to enhancing the quality of life for individuals affected by brain injury through our programs.

We invite you to bring your energy, enthusiasm, and passion to the Walk for Thought. This is the time to reconnect with old friends, make new ones, and feel the incredible sense of community that surrounds us. Together, we can make a difference, inspire change, and support those who need it most.

**Registration is now OPEN!** The walk is Saturday, September 16, 2023 — get ready for an unforgettable experience. Stay tuned for more updates at braininjurymn.org as we share details about all the ways you can get involved. Spread the word, gather your friends and family, and let’s come together on September 16, 2023, ready to make memories, share stories, and create a day filled with laughter and love. **Get ready to unite at the Walk for Thought!**
Experience an event that really changes lives!

WALK FOR THOUGHT

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