Devoted Couple Knows Firsthand Impact of Brain Injury Support Group

Abby and Michael Blackburn have been an item since they first met as college students at Georgia State University almost 40 years ago while working at the university radio station. They’ve been happily married 35 years this coming September. About 12 years ago, life changed dramatically for the couple when Abby blacked out and fell face-first to the ground in their home. She woke up and saw blood and called 911. Michael was out of town.

“I don’t remember much but remember the blood and knew I had to call an ambulance,” recalls Abby. She doesn’t know how long she was on the floor until the ambulance arrived.

Abby was stabilized at a nearby hospital and then transported to Tampa General Hospital’s Neuroscience Intensive Care Unit. She spent eight weeks in the Neuro ICU, followed by six weeks in critical care and six more months of outpatient intensive rehabilitation. Recovery was long and tough, and Abby had to relearn to walk. I remember back at her inpatient rehabilitation, she said, “I lost my balance and something. And we’ve been regulars since then.”

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, safety measures had to be put in place, and the group has had to take a hiatus. However, the Rehab Center is exploring the possibility of meeting virtually through Zoom or Microsoft Teams until they can meet in person again.

“I’m lucky. I got my Abby back and we’ve become closer,” said Michael. “We get as much from the other patients and families as the doctors and nurses.”

“The support group is not just focused on the survivors, but caregivers, too,” said Michael. “We get as much from each other in the ICU, which is very common for brain injury patients. Reflecting back on her inpatient rehabilitation, she said, “I lost everything and was relearning to walk. I remember every day walking near the water.”

Because of the brain injury, Abby developed hyperacusis, a highly debilitating hearing disorder that increases sensitivity to sounds. Every sound can be extremely irritating and disturbing to those afflicted with the condition.

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“Dr. Angelica Acree, the clinical psychologist who has managed the brain injury support group for about nine years, adds, “our patients have told us there is nothing like this in the community. The patients can participate in a group with others who understand their challenges in an environment without much noise or distraction. Group members provide support, knowledge, and understanding for each other. It provides an atmosphere to connect with one another and to share experiences. Some participants travel over an hour to be a part of the group,” she said.

Each month, the group focuses on a different topic such as “Parenting after Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI),” “Coping with Emotional Changes after Brain Injury,” or “Driving after a TBI.” Sometimes the group has an open discussion in which group members share their experiences and concerns.

The ZeroG harness is mounted to a wall track, the patient is strapped in and then the therapist and the patient's physical therapist can adjust the ZeroG system to the patient's needs. The ZeroG system provides a stable environment for patients to practice walking, standing, and sitting activities. The ZeroG harness is designed to provide support and balance assistance, allowing patients to practice walking, standing, and sitting activities in a safe and controlled environment.

Maximizing Patient Outcomes Without the Risk of Falling

Imagine you’ve had a stroke or been severely injured from a car accident. Or you’ve developed a neurological condition that paralyzes your whole body. You can’t walk at all. Your life has suddenly turned upside down.

Paralysis affects hundreds of people in the Tampa Bay area each year; people like Steve Connors. Connors was once a paratrooper with the prestigious 82nd airborne of the U.S. Army, based at Fort Bragg. Throughout his career, he was a medical transporter, a deputy sheriff, and currently a member of the Lakeland Fire Department. He’s always been active and lived a life of service.

But last December, Steve woke up and had tingling in his hands and feet and knew he had to get to the hospital. Even though he lived a reasonable distance away in Plant City, he told his wife she had to transport him to Tampa General Hospital and bypass the other hospitals along the way. He knew Tampa General could provide the best care.

The sensation first manifested as an inexplicable weakness and then rapidly evolved into a life-threatening situation, eventually paralyzing his entire body. Steve was in extreme pain, unable to walk, eat, speak, and even breathe for himself.

The doctors diagnosed him with Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare neurological disorder in which the body’s immune system attacks nerves. He spent months in the hospital.

But Connors is a fighter. And no stranger to hard work. He powered through and progressed from being ventilated in the ICU to enduring daily hours of inpatient physical and occupational therapy. When Steve came to TGH, he was a healthy, fit 202 pounds, but after months of being bed-bound, his body mass declined, and his weight dropped to 157 pounds. Then he entered rehabilitation. “It was painful, but I worked out hard every day,” said Connors. “When I first started in rehab, I couldn’t hold a Coke can. I was so weak.”

Thanks to a generous donation by The Hillsborough County Hospital Authority and the TGH Foundation’s Rehab Equipment and Technology Fund, a new state-of-the-art technology called the “ZeroG Gait and Balance System” by Aretech helped Steve regain his strength and learn to walk again.

The ZeroG protects patients from falls while providing body-weight support as patients practice walking. It allows patients to practice walking, standing, and sitting activities in a safe and controlled environment. The ZeroG harness is designed to provide support and balance assistance, allowing patients to practice walking, standing, and sitting activities in a safe and controlled environment.

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A young stroke survivor, Alana Wheelwright, right, with her older sister Kai, who has supported her throughout her journey.

General Hospital’s Emergency Department, where Alana spent seven and a half weeks in the hospital and underwent surgery to repair her heart. Her paralyzed body was unable to walk and talk. She would cry from frustration. It wasn’t until she saw her older sister Kai in her hospital room that Alana spoke again, saying her sister’s name for the first time since the stroke. That simple word set her on the path to regain her verbal skills.

Alana has progressed mainly because of the support of her family and intense therapy. Her grandfather Mark Sierra has brought her to TGH outpatient therapy sessions three times a week for the last year. He’s even built a workout room for Alana at home to supplement the lessons learned at TGH.

Mark Sierra, or Papa, as Alana calls him, says, “I had just gone through a stroke with my brother right before Alana’s stroke, so I knew what to expect. I saw the frustration in her face and that she couldn’t understand what was happening,” he said.

“We’re out on our way to outpatient therapy. We always play a song by artist Andy Grammer entitled ‘Don’t Give Up On Me’ and this always pumps her up to work hard,” he added. “Every single one that has taken care of her is sweet and loving.”

While Alana was in the hospital last year, her occupational therapist Amy Hayward and physical therapist Lauren Wendel helped Alana achieve her first steps. Her current physical therapist, Samantha Thompson, who has worked primarily with Alana since January, recalls that Alana’s whole right side was affected. But she has made tremendous strides with intensive therapy. Samantha has been working with Alana to advance her walking skills and refine her gait. “She’s always smiling and excited for therapy,” Samantha says. “She loves a challenge and loves to play balancing games.”

Alana now wears a brace on her right leg and still has some weakness on her right arm but has made significant progress. She enjoys riding her bike, swimming, and playing basketball in her grandparents’ driveway.

Alana was named the “Unicorn Girl” while she was in the hospital for her love of everything unicorn. She was thrilled to meet Spirit, the certified therapy miniature horse, alongside owner Brittany Beard.

Auditory-verbal therapy is a very family-centered, specialized field. Parents are allowed in therapy sessions, so they can learn how to continue lessons at home. “We coach and teach so they can use the strategies at home,” said Sierra. “It’s amazing to see the progress. One of the greatest feelings and so rewarding. Sierra further shared the satisfaction of patients and families. “Some patients long to say the simple words of ‘I love you,’ and it’s so special when they can say and hear those words.”

Tampa General’s Auditory-Verbal Therapy Offers Hope for Young Deaf Patients

Jaylianne Rivera was a typical, healthy 5-year-old, enjoying everything like her friends in her hometown of Puerto Rico. Until one day, while participating in a school field day with her kindergarten classmates, her mother, who was observing the class, noticed something unusual. The field day featured sports, running, and playing games, with loud music entertaining them. As Rivera would play, she would come up close to the speaker with no reaction.

“The teachers then directed the children to do certain activities one by one, but Rivera was the last to respond. Her mother knew something was wrong. She questioned Jaylianne and noticed she had trouble hearing.”

So, she immediately took her to an audiologist to be tested. “At first, I was in shock. I didn’t know what was happening. I was crying and very sad,” said Edmundo Santiago, Jaylianne’s mother. The audiologist tested her daughter and said she needed to see an otolaryngologist or ENT, who confirmed she lost her hearing.

The five-year-old was diagnosed with bilateral profound hearing loss due to Mondini malformation and enlarged vestibular aqueduct (EVA) syndrome. The doctor suggested that Rivera be fitted for cochlear implants, a small electronic device that electrically stimulates the cochlear nerve (nerve for hearing). The implant has external and internal parts. The outer part sits behind the ear and picks up sounds with a microphone. It then processes the sound and transmits it to the inner part of the implant.

In Puerto Rico, cochlear implants would cost $80,000 out of pocket—just for the surgery. Device costs would be additional. Knowing that was out of reach financially, Santiago took to the internet and started researching options. She decided to move to Tampa, where prices could better fit her budget. Jaylianne received her first cochlear implant in 2019 and her second in 2020.

Auditory-verbal therapy is a specialized therapy type designed to teach a child to use the hearing provided by a hearing aid or a cochlear implant for understanding speech and learning to talk. The child learns to develop hearing as an active sense so that listening becomes automatic, and the child seeks out sounds. Hearing and active listening become an integral part of communication, recreation, socialization, education, and work.

Denyse Sierra-Pepanaro is the speech-language pathologist who started the AVT program earlier this year and has exclusively worked with Rivera. Sierra is bilingual, which has been an asset in working with Rivera and her mom. “Fortunately, Jaylianne could hear for the first five years of her life.” Sierra said. “When Jaylianne first started the therapy, she could hear some but not understand everything,” she added. “Now she doesn’t have to see a face or use lipreading to understand the conversation. She can understand by just listening—which is huge.”

Her audiologist then referred her to Tampa General’s Auditory-Verbal Therapy Program, one of just a few programs in the region. Auditory-Verbal Therapy is a specialized therapy type designed to teach a child to use the hearing provided by a hearing aid or a cochlear implant for understanding speech and learning to talk. The child learns to develop hearing as an active sense so that listening becomes automatic, and the child seeks out sounds. Hearing and active listening become an integral part of communication, recreation, socialization, education, and work.

Jaylianne Rivera is in auditory-verbal therapy with her speech language pathologist, Denise Sierra.

Verbal Therapy Offers Hope for Young Deaf Patients

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Santiago gives an enthusiastic endorsement of her daughter’s progress. “The experience has been super great! I would recommend it to other parents to come here for therapy.”

As her hearing has improved these past few months, Jaylianne has continued to develop her drawing and painting skills. She wants to be an artist when she grows up. “In the meantime, she is proud of the strides she has made with her hearing through her AVT therapy sessions. ‘It’s good, and it’s fun.’”
**The Little Girl Who Loves Unicorns, Walks and Talks Again After a Severe Stroke**

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Young stroke survivor, Alana Wheelwright, right, with her older sister Kai, who has supported her throughout her journey.

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“I’m lucky. I got my Abby back and we’ve become friends with some of the other support members and have enjoyed dinners together at each other’s homes,” said Michael.

Abby is no longer able to work, but she enjoys many activities at home, including sewing, baking, and gardening. Michael is semi-retired. They miss the temporary break from the group but look forward to seeing their fellow support group friends again. To learn more about the brain injury support group, contact (813) 844-3541.

Steve remembers sitting and watching other rehab patients, thinking he could never achieve what they did. But then he thought about it more and decided that there will always be someone “worse than me” and said to himself, “no, I CAN do that!”

The ZeroG helped him have the confidence to push the limits.

Steve is currently an outpatient rehab twice a week at Tampa General Hospital and a big advocate of the ZeroG. Through hard work and extensive physical therapy, he has learned how to eat and walk and is slowly rebuilding his strength to return to doing what he loves, serving as a Lakeland firefighter.

Since Convosy closed, center is shown above with fellow Lakeland firefighters.

Tampa General Hospital

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Paralysis affects hundreds of people in the Tampa Bay area each year; people like Steve Connors. Connors was once a paratrooper with the prestigious 82nd airborne of the U.S. Army, based at Fort Bragg. Throughout his career, he was a medical transporter, a deputy sheriff, and currently a member of the Lakeland Fire Department. He’s always been active and lived a life of service. But last December, Steve woke up and had tingling in his hands and feet and knew he had to get to the hospital. Even though he lived a reasonable distance away in Plant City, he told his wife she had to transport him to Tampa General Hospital and bypass the other hospitals along the way. He knew Tampa General could provide the best care.

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The doctors diagnosed him with Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare neurological disorder in which the body’s immune system attacks nerves. He spent months in the hospital. But Connors is a fighter. And no stranger to hard work. He powered through and progressed from being ventilated in the ICU to enduring daily hours of inpatient physical and occupational therapy.

When Steve came to TGH, he was a healthy, fit 202 pounds, but after months of being bed-bound, he lost his muscle mass, and his weight came down to 157 pounds. Then he entered rehabilitation. “It was painful, but I worked hard every day,” said Connors. “When I first started in rehab, I couldn’t hold a Coke can. I was so weak.”

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Michael and Abby Blackburn, longtime members of the Brain Injury Support Group

Injured military veteran Steve Connors, center, is shown above with fellow Lakeland firefighters.

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