

Brain injury Awareness month highlights importance of safety

Written By **Sam Odrowski**

Whether you slip and fall, find yourself in a motor vehicle collision or knocked unconscious while playing hockey, in a split second everything can change because of a brain injury.

Dufferin resident, Wendy Cook knows this well, as her 26-year-old son Keaton suffered a traumatic brain injury at one year of age and she has been his primary caregiver ever since.

With June being Brain Injury Awareness Month, a time when information is widely circulated about the invisible injury and how it can be prevented, Cook noted the importance of putting safety first.

"Protecting your brain is a lifelong activity. You only get one, and it's so important, it's central control, like a computer, it controls everything in your body, your emotions, your breathing, how your mind works or doesn't, your sleep status ? everything is controlled by your brain, so it's important to protect it," she said.

"Sometimes when I watch parents teaching their kids to bicycle, it's interesting that the kids have on their helmets but the parents don't, and I think that to have a real appreciation for safety the parent needs to have a helmet on too."

When looking at contact sports, Cook says there should be more conversations around protecting one's head, avoiding concussion and how to deal with one when it happens.

"A couple of years ago I met a young man out of high school who was working part time here in Orangeville at one of the stores I was in and he said he'd had eight concussions because of contact sports," she recalled. "His brain was just so rattled."

"What most people don't know is that if you do get a concussion, the issues can be for life," Cook added.

Once every three minutes, someone in Canada suffers a traumatic brain injury, with roughly 150,000 Canadians experiencing a brain injury each year and over 1.5 million currently living with one.

While so many Canadians are impacted by brain injuries, Barbara Gilchrist of Mind Forward Brain Injury Services, which provides programming in Orangeville, notes that there's a gap between the need and demand for supports.

"There are many, many survivors and there's just not enough provision of health care or community services to people with brain injuries," said Gilchrist.

Mind Forward currently provides assistance and support to roughly 100 people in Dufferin and over 400 in Peel and Halton.

A day program in Orangeville ran for nine years but had to be put on pause when the pandemic started, with everything changing over to a videocall format, using Zoom.

"We offer all sorts of social engagement, we work on rehabilitation, social skills, social interaction, increasing self-esteem, and building friendships," said Gilchrist. "Our mission is to help create the highest quality of life for all of our clients and we certainly have extensive caregiver support's also."

As well, Mind Forward helps some of their clients access the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), secure housing, assist with food security, and any other social determinants of health.

?Our agency, we have a number of homes where people do live with 24/7 care and rehabilitation, and then we have clients that are extremely independent and just need a little bit of extra support in the community to live successfully,? Gilchrist noted.

One of Mind Forward's independent clients, Vito Loschiavo was in a car accident 16 years ago and airlifted to Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto where he went into a coma for about a week. Once he came out of the coma, he spent three months in rehabilitation before heading back home in Orangeville.

Loschiavo says the brain injury forced him to relearn many things and left him with memory issues but noted that his support team has been fantastic in assisting him along with the way.

He told the Citizen that Mind Forward played a critical role in helping him reintegrate into society in the years following his brain injury.

?When I learned about them I was a little bit hesitant at first, but I went there and it was very helpful because they gave me the opportunity to meet others who have also experienced brain injury,? Loschiavo shared.

?They had occasional social outings, that was very helpful, and they also occasionally did seminars on issues that easily affects brain injured people, like memory strategies, improving moods, anger management, and things like that.?

Loschiavo noted that the COVID-19 restrictions and rolling lockdowns must be especially difficult for newly brain injured people. He says getting back out into the real world, with the help of supports, was key in his recovery journey, so those who don't have that option must be struggling.

Loschiavo added that for himself, in-person programming is great but he doesn't do well with Zoom and can't wait until the current COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

One thing that he says really helped him through his recovery is playing classical guitar.

A few years after Loschiavo's brain injury in 2005, he began performing live at nursing homes, which he and the seniors enjoyed very much up until the COVID-19 pandemic struck last March and it had to be paused.

He says one of biggest challenges he's faced is the sadness and depression associated with his brain injury. Loschiavo notes that while he was never suicidal, he understands how that could be an issue for some people, which is why it is critical to reach out for support as needed.

Anyone who has a brain injury or supports someone with a brain injury is encouraged to visit Mind Forward's website: <https://mindforward.org/> and reach out to them directly by email at info@mindforward.org or by phone at (905) 949-4411.

Looking ahead to September, Mind Forward has a memorandum of understanding with Tweedsmuir Memorial Presbyterian Church to use their space to offer programs again when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Those in need of support are also encouraged to reach out to the Headwaters Acquired Brain Injury (HABI) Group, which is a community group of survivors and loved ones that meets once per month. The group also hosts educational information sessions.

To get in contact email normanphillips74@gmail.com or call 519-215-1519.