

From tragedy to triumph: Headwaters Acquired Brain Injury Group empowers survivors to live their best life, overcome obstacles

Written By **Sam Odrowski**

Whether it's a slip and fall, motor vehicle accident or taking a hit to the head playing sports ? life can change in an instant when someone suffers a brain injury.

And the 165,000 Canadians who have serious brain injury each year can be left disabled or cognitively impaired for the rest of their life.

To help support people working through the new challenges that come with having an injured brain, Headwaters Acquired Brain Injury Group (HABI) was created in 2009.

The not-for-profit group was created by and for people with brain injuries to help support those impacted, along with their family, friends, or caregiver.

?The group was really created by people living with brain injury in our community, who got together and felt they needed and wanted this group,? said Kindrey Rowland, who helped establish the group nearly 15 years ago.

?My personal love is to work with people who have acquired brain injury and helping them with their cognitive communication in order to promote their quality of life,? added Rowland, who also works as a speech pathologist in Orangeville.

HABI is free to attend, has no waitlist, and is operated through the Ontario Brain Injury Association.

?We are here to support people on their journey,? said Rowland.

The group hosts social outings, group activities, and educational events with guest speakers covering topics related to brain injuries.

HABI's up to about 70 members and is also focused on public awareness, teaching people in the community about brain injuries and how to prevent them.

The brain is arguably the most vital organ in the body, making it essential to protect from unnecessary harm or injury.

Michael ?Pinky? Cloutchier, who's been part of Headwaters Acquired Brain Injury Group (HABI) for eight years, said it's frustrating seeing people not wearing helmets when biking or skateboarding, as he knows firsthand how dangerous it can be.

Cloutchier had a severe brain injury in 1991 when crossing the street on a bicycle without a helmet in Scarborough and was struck by a Jeep.

?He hit me so fast he shot-put me,? Cloutchier recalled, adding that he spent 40 days in a coma after the collision and a year in the hospital.

?It's so good seeing children wearing helmets. But you know what's disturbing ? it gets me so vexed ? when I see parents with no helmets,? Cloutchier remarked. ?Anybody can get a brain injury. Put a helmet on.?

Following his injury, Cloutchier would organize outings for people with brain injuries and help to facilitate support groups.

?I like to help people who have brain injuries. I've done that with many agencies in the past when I was in Toronto,? he noted. ?I

drove people from house to house over to their brain injury group, once a week, or even for therapy.?

He met his wife, Sarah Briggs, through a brain injury group in the Toronto area and said they've both enjoyed being a part of HABI over the past eight years.

?It's so amazing being around people with brain injuries. I feel at ease, at rest,? Cloutchier noted. It's very understanding. If they see me do something wrong, [they know] it's a deficit of my brain injury.?

Cloutchier's wife joined HABI alongside him and suffered a brain injury in 1994. She fell during a downhill ski race and broke several bones in her face.

?I lost a lot of blood and basically shattered everything in my face ? lower jaw, upper jaw, eye socket, cheekbone. I ruptured my Eustachian tube in my ear.?

But she didn't learn about her brain injury until years after the accident.

While trying to go to Teachers College, the demands of schooling became overwhelming, as her brain couldn't keep up with processing so much new information.

?I had to withdraw from the program for medical reasons and that was sort of the beginning of thinking that I likely have a brain injury. But the brain injury I had, wasn't picturable on the scans.?

She said technology is advancing to catch the more diffused or subtle changes to the brain after an impact, but this wasn't available in the mid-90s when she became injured.

Briggs said she and Cloutchier have found HABI to be very helpful in connecting with like-minded individuals, receiving support, and socializing.

Despite their challenges, Briggs and Cloutchier have a seven-year-old daughter and live independently in Collingwood.

?When you create a support system around you, I believe anything is possible,? said Briggs.

She added that she'd recommend anyone with a brain injury ? mild, moderate or severe ? to join a brain injury support group like HABI.

Tanya Nolan, who joined HABI almost a year ago, was in a motor vehicle accident in March 2020, suffering a mild traumatic brain injury.

The symptoms associated with her injury ? difficulty with cognitive function, reading, vision, communication, driving, fatigue, and daily headaches ? continue to this day, which led her to HABI.

?At first, I didn't think that I was the type of person for this group because I had a mild traumatic brain injury, I didn't have a severe one,? she said. ?But when I got here, at my first meeting, I realized? the group is for all spectrums. Anybody who's dealing with post-concussion syndrome all the way up to severe brain injury,?

Nolan added, ?It just felt so comfortable because everybody around me knew what I was going through, or had been going through similar stuff as well, either as a caregiver seeing it or as other injured individuals feeling it.?

She said one of the main struggles during recovery from a brain injury is feeling like ?nobody really understands.?

?I could finally just take that deep breath and feel comfortable in a place where, if I forgot a word, it's okay, they would help you out, or laugh along with you,?said Nolan.

?It was just like, you didn't feel self-conscious about not fully having your cognition in place all the time, so it's been a little bit of a saving grace for me.?

Nolan is both a member and volunteer for HABI, and says it's been incredibly fulfilling to help people going through a similar experience.

She said she's very thankful there are support groups for people like her, such as HABI.

?People need it. I needed it. I didn't even think I did but I really did,? Nolan noted. ?You can't go through stuff alone without people understanding.?

She's found that a lot of medical practitioners don't know where to send people like her, and HABI is the perfect place.

?You get resources, you get understanding, like there's so much that this group has to offer, other than just socializing,? Nolan explained. ?The group has something for everybody, and they're really approachable, and accepting. From day one, everybody's here for you.?

HABI meets on the first Tuesday of every month, and people living outside of the Headwaters region are welcome to attend.

To get in touch with HABI, email normanphillips74@gmail.com or call 519-215-1519.

?When you come to HABI, you're surrounded by people who understand and who are walking in your shoes, and there's nothing quite like that. It's different than getting rehabilitation ? you're with people who understand the journey you're on,? Rowland lauded.