

Anna Nicasio, All About Communication

Local student with brain injury studies communications at FDU

Rahway, NJ – The largest challenge that Anna Nicasio, of Rahway, NJ, has faced since sustaining a brain injury five years ago has been speech. You might be surprised, then, to learn that this senior's major at Fairleigh Dickenson University (FDU) is Communications. But, for Anna, wanting to speak and having a lot to say are two very different things.

Anna was 15, on vacation with her family in Dominican Republic, when she sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI) that would change her life. On July 1, 2002, the family planned to rent go-carts. This was the only care in the world that free-spirited Anna had on this particular day. Rather than wait for the rest of their family, she and her younger brother Carlos, who was 14 at the time, rushed off with an acquaintance to the go-cart rental shop. They never made it there. Whether she knew it at the time or not, Anna cannot recall, but their friend only had a permit, not a license, to drive. The girl lost control of the car and they crashed into a utility pole.

Anna was hurt the worst, but Carlos did not escape injury. He too had injuries that took months to recover from. Meanwhile, Anna was in a coma for two months, and sustained a brain severe brain injury in addition to her physical injuries. When she was medically stable, she was moved from the Dominican hospital to the United States, where she underwent various stages of rehabilitation at UMDNJ University Hospital, Children's Specialized Hospital, and JFK Johnson Rehabilitation Institute. To this day, Anna lives with the consequences of brain injury—memory lapses, hemiparesis which causes paralysis in one hand and affects her gait, and trouble problem solving, to name a few.

Of all the challenges that brain injury has created for her and her family, Anna will tell you that dysarthria has been the most difficult for her to personally overcome. Dysarthria is a motor speech disorder in which the muscles of the mouth, face, and respiratory system may become weak, move slowly, or not move at all after a brain injury. Anna's speech is slow and slurred because the muscles used for speaking are affected by her brain injury. She has just as much to say as anyone, and her mind can process her thoughts at a rapid fire pace, but her words get held up in her mouth. Anna says "I'm out of practice speaking, because I don't want to talk." Speaking, which most people don't even think about, is accompanied by frustration and embarrassment for Anna Nicasio.

Therein lay the challenge. It is the emotional impact of her speech that Anna has had to learn to cope with. Learning how to navigate the physical challenges of her speech was easy comparatively. Anna exhibits remarkable patience and control, resulting in fine conversation. She is quite easy to understand for anyone willing to take a moment and listen. The trouble is, not everyone in this fast paced, multi-tasking world is willing, or sensitive to Anna's need for a slightly different style of conversation—one with just a little more turn taking and a slightly slower pace.

"I used to want people to listen to everything I had to say. To force them to listen," says Anna, "but now I see it as their loss. I'm smart, and if they don't care to listen, it's their loss."

That conclusion took Anna all of the last five years to come to. She says it's only just recently that she has learned to accept it, and not feel responsible when people don't want to understand her. Perhaps it's not so surprising that Anna became interested in communications studies. She was always outgoing, involved in sports and the performing arts. Before her brain injury, Anna would cut class to practice the piano, something she can only do now using one hand. Now she is intrigued by different forms of expression—the theories and concepts of interpersonal communication. She loves studying what people are trying to achieve by different methods of communication, and is particularly interested in semiology, the study of signs and symbols.

Anna is active in both her university community and the brain injury community. She is a member of the Latin American Student Organizations, the Proud Italian Student Association, and the PR club at FDU. When she has the opportunity, Anna also participates in Brain Injury Association of New Jersey activities, such as its camp program TREK and Annual Seminar. She has also spoken for the Association, as a panelist on a continuing education panel.

Anna welcomes the opportunity to speak out about her brain injury, because, she says, "it can happen to anyone." If she could share one piece of information with someone who does not know about brain injury, she says that she would want to tell them, "I'm the same person that I always was. I'm just slightly altered. If you think it is difficult to understand me, just think how difficult it is for me to be trapped in this body when my brain works the same."