

TBI: My Formula for Recovery and Success

by Matthew J. Schilling

In early November, 2003 at the age of 32, I purchased a new motorcycle that was considerably faster than my previous one. With just a few days of riding experience on it, I decided to take it on a major controlled access highway at about 11p.m.

I attempted to pass a vehicle in the right lane of this roadway after giving the driver repeated signals of my intent. Apparently the driver of this SUV did not see me, and attempted to move into the left lane while I was passing her on the right. I collided with the right corner taillight section of the vehicle and was propelled about 150 to 200 feet in the air. I was wearing a helmet, but it was not fastened and flew off during the impact. I landed in the middle of the highway, and had it not been for a good samaritan riding in his car behind me, I would have probably been run over by traffic. He stopped the oncoming vehicles, pulled me from the highway, and called 911.

I was airlifted to Cooper Medical, one of the trauma centers in the region, and their extraordinary efforts and care saved my life. I was placed on life support systems and was in a coma for about seven weeks. Doctors gave me only about a 5 percent chance of coming out of my coma, but my two good friends, Peter and David, along with some of my family, continually talked to me and played familiar music to bring me back to consciousness. I woke up on January 3, 2004.

I was not without severe injuries after my coma. I was given a tracheotomy to help me breathe and a feeding tube for nourishment. I had difficulty speaking, had an "alien" left hand that would not obey by brain commands, and I was in a wheelchair and unable to do anything on my own. I also had a large growth of cartilage, called hetero-ossification (HO), on my right knee. This is a condition fostered in traumatic brain injury victims where the brain stimulates the production of excess cartilage, usually in a joint of the body. My memory was almost non-existent, and my behavior was erratic and sometimes explosive.

Once my gains no longer exceeded their expectations for further advancements, additional time at this facility could no longer be justified, and I was moved into a long-term care nursing facility.

I am presently 37 years old, but my age doesn't seem to be an issue with regard to my ability to progress. However, the three-and-a-half-year odyssey of my recovery involved stays at many different facilities in the state of New Jersey, and currently I reside with three other men in a brain injury group home in Southern New Jersey.



Unfortunately, many of the healthcare facilities where I resided, including long-term care and nursing homes, provided minimal therapies. Because of this, my two friends found it necessary to research and pursue alternative venues to promote what they believed could be a higher level of achievement for me. However, when I was deemed to be at a plateau with my ambulatory advancement, they found other specialized rehabilitation therapists.

I still have a lot of work ahead of me, and my most critical issues include bettering my speech so it is intelligible, balance and walking, memory improvement, and socialization/integration and better understanding and tolerance of others I come into contact with and who have various impairments.

At the time of my injury I was about to move into my fourth year of nursing school. I have begun to take courses that will improve my memory and allow me to complete my nursing degree. My ultimate long-term goal is to attend medical school to become an obstetrician; I have five children of my own and would love to be able to bring healthy children into this world. Whether I achieve this or not I cannot

predict, but I will give it my best shot.

My life has changed drastically from what it once was, since most of my life now centers on my physical and cognitive rehabilitation, speech therapy, and self-training. My friends Peter and David helped me to enroll in an academic course last Spring (I recently got a B+ in Human Biology at the local community college.). They also accompany me at church and the local YMCA every Sunday, enrolled me in aqua-therapy to improve my core balance, take me to special events outside my group home, and always look out for my well-being. Without them I do not know what would have become of me! They push me to make greater advancements and are constantly reminding me of what I must do to achieve my long-term goals, which they point out must start with me. It was because of them that I did not slip into a world of self-pity and non-action.

When I learned of the availability of a special speech clinic at Temple University, Philadelphia, I saw it as an opportunity to intensify my efforts to recover my communication skills. I often see myself spending too much time being unproductive, and when offered the chance to participate at as a volunteer at the Voorhees Pediatric Facility, I took this to be another open door towards the fulfillment of my desire to give back to the community. Over the past two years I have visited many of the therapists and doctors who had direct medical involvement in my care at the beginning of my injury, and they are truly amazed at the progress I have made. This reassurance from them has also kept me pushing ahead, realizing that I can never give up.

In January 2008, I was invited to address an audience of business professionals at the annual fundraisers breakfast at the Mt. Laurel YMCA. I prepared a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation for this event. I outlined pictorially the enormous physical strides I had made after 18 months as a member of this organization. I believe that it was quite evident to the attendees that my earlier physical disabilities have not deterred me from pushing the envelope to near independent ambulation with the help of their extensive and diverse equipment. In less than four months, with determination to abandon my wheelchair, I now use a Rollator walker with safety breaks and seat to move about daily.

My friend Peter was fortunate to find out about the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey from one of his friends who is a professional in the healthcare industry and is on the Board of this organization. I decided that joining this Association would not only be informative to me but would also allow me to give support to others who need it. In May 2008 I attended my first conference of this organization (The Annual Seminar in Eatontown) and discovered a totally new world populated by others who also had a strong will to succeed beyond their earlier prognosis.



When someone in your family sustains a brain injury, the outlook and future can be frightening, bleak, and overwhelming. The public needs to know that it doesn't necessarily have to be the end of the world for them, and there are many avenues that can be explored to foster the maximum recovery possible in an individual. My advice to family members would be to give encouragement, research what agencies and facilities are available, and be constantly and proactively involved with their loved one.

My interests include playing cards, games, reading, working out, swimming and attending any event that is mentally challenging.

My only regret is that there are not enough brain injury residences and facilities nationwide to handle the volume of people with brain injury including those returning from the Iraq War. This of course is counter-productive to achieving even a modicum of success for many people with brain injury, and I truly feel blessed that I have made it this far.