



**BRAIN INJURY
ASSOCIATION
OF NEW JERSEY**

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No Brain Injury is
Too Mild to Ignore,
or Too Severe to
Lose Hope

Brain Injury: A Parent's Journey

By: Kimberly Thomas

In 1999, I was enrolled in a Communications course at Cornell University's New York City Adult Education Program, and the professor asked the class for a written and oral report on a subject for which we felt passion. Passion is a powerful word. We could not simply write about a topic we found interesting. We had to feel a strong and constant dedication to our topic.

The Brain Injury Association of New Jersey asked me to come on board and help it help others, but what they did was help me help myself.

I knew immediately that traumatic brain injury (TBI) should be my subject, but I didn't feel qualified to write, not to mention speak, on the issue of traumatic brain

injury. I left class somewhat stressed over the pending task; in fact, it robbed me of any sleep that night. I stayed up thinking about my oldest son Brandon.

Brandon was a happy child who had very few bad days thanks to his sunny disposition. On December 21, 1989, my mother picked him up from school. Brandon had a bunch of holiday treats from the school Christmas party, including a big red helium-filled balloon. She strapped Brandon into his booster seat in the back seat of our Chevy S-10 Blazer as he talked with excitement about the Christmas party.

The balloon slipped out of his hand and floated to the back of the truck while my mother was driving. Brandon unstrapped himself from his booster seat and climbed over the seat to the back of the truck to retrieve his balloon. As my mother was turning through an intersection, and as Brandon was reaching for his balloon, a flatbed truck ran through a red light and hit the side of our S-10 Blazer. The impact knocked Brandon out of the vehicle through the side window. It was the first bad day he had ever had in his life.

I laid awake thinking about my Brandon. If I were to write a paper on TBI, all I felt qualified to write about was what Brandon had been through since his accident and how it has affected our family. But, my purpose was not to gain sympathy, it was to create awareness.

I had never heard of traumatic brain injury until my son was injured. When I received the call notifying me of the accident, my thoughts were on broken limbs, scrapes, and wounds. I was not prepared for traumatic brain injury. I had no idea that Brandon's bad day would stretch over many years or that, quite possibly, I might never see my son's sunny disposition again. His life—our lives—were forever changed, and forever challenged.



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This paper I had to write for school would only reach an audience of 28 classmates. I would only get ten minutes to tell them what I knew about traumatic brain injury. Whether I got a good grade for the paper or not, the one thing I hoped to achieve was to give traumatic brain injury a voice. I wanted to put it on my classmates' radar, and I wanted to let them know that my son and I are two of the millions of faces of brain injury.

I looked through the yellow pages and found the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey. I called and explained that I was writing a paper for school. The BIANJ staff was very helpful and invited me to an upcoming conference. They assured me I'd learn a lot if I attended.

I did attend the conference and found myself surrounded by caregivers, family members, people with brain injury, and the many individuals who work in some capacity with traumatic brain injury. These people talked about their injuries, their frustrations and the challenges they faced.

I went into a breakout session for parents who had children with brain injuries. I listened to other parents speak, and what I heard was a reflection of what I had also felt. The anguish on their faces was a mirror image of my own. For the first time in many years I cried. I didn't know anyone in the room, but everyone was so supportive. I was not alone, and for the first time since my son's accident I exhaled.

Shortly after the conference, I got a call from Wendy Berk, a BIANJ Mentor Coordinator. She asked if I would be interested in speaking about being the mother to a child with TBI. I accepted that invitation and have since spoken at many events. Brandon's story was difficult to tell in the beginning. However the more I talked about Brandon, the better I felt because people either learned what it's like to be a TBI parent, or they could relate because they were a TBI parent.

About a year later, Wendy Berk approached me about mentoring others whose lives have been touched by traumatic brain injury. I completed mentor training and have been partnered to mentor several people over the last few years.

I am also a member of the Children and Adolescent Committee, which addresses needs of children and adolescents with brain injury from birth to 21 years old. These involvements have excited me, because nothing of this kind was available to me when Brandon was injured in 1989.

I started out on this journey trying to gather information for a school paper. Little did I know it would be the beginning of a journey that would forever change and enrich my life. I've learned a lot, I've grown tremendously, I've



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allowed myself the opportunity to heal, and was able to give help to others. The Brain Injury Association of New Jersey asked me to come on board and help it help others, but what they did was help me help myself. I will always be grateful to them for reaching out to me, not just once, but continuously over the years.

I did write my paper and I presented it to my classmates as planned. No one in the room had ever heard of Traumatic Brain Injury, so my mission was accomplished. Now they knew. Most were shocked to hear that brain injuries occur not just in car accidents, but sports injuries, or from bicycle accidents and even strokes to name a few. Now they knew.

I once read somewhere that it doesn't matter what happens to you; the true testament of a man's character is what he does afterwards. I admire my son because he's taught me that no matter what challenges life throws your way, there is always light at the end of the tunnel. Brandon chases that light, and he embraces his life as it is with joy and laughter. Brandon is my hero, he is my teacher, and I am so very proud to say he is also my son.

Kimberly Thomas is a Mentor and Member of the Association's Children and Adolescents Committee

This article was originally published in the 2005 Fall Edition of the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey's Newsletter.