PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: RICHARD ANDERSON – CALLED TO BE AN ADVOCATE

In August 2004, I sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI) while on a family vacation at the Jersey Shore. To this day, my short-term memory has limits. I struggle with finding the right words to express my thoughts and emotions. And, I no longer have the ability to taste and smell. I am sharing this because looking at me, you might not know I have a brain injury. These challenges are what we call “invisible losses.”

Despite these challenges, I try and help other individuals with brain injury by increasing awareness of TBI and advocating on behalf of the TBI community. I am a volunteer board trustee of the Brain Injury Alliance of New Jersey (BIANJ) and a member of the Kessler Foundation TBI Consumer Advisory Board. My wife Rose and I are also members of the Council for the Head Injured Community (CHIC) sponsored by BIANJ.

Currently, more than 5 million people living in our country have disabilities resulting from brain injury. The financial costs are staggering — $35 billion annually, which includes medical costs as well as costs associated with lost earnings and social service needs. Persons with severe brain injuries, like me, face 5 to 10 years of intensive rehabilitation, including speech, physical, cognitive, occupational, psychiatric, emotional, and behavioral therapies.

In most cases, a brain injury is not an event that heals and goes away. It becomes a chronic condition, and one may need assistance and advocacy for the remainder of their lives. The only cure for brain injury is prevention. Public awareness is critical to our efforts to prevent brain injuries and maximize the recovery process of all individuals affected by TBI. My calling is to increase awareness about brain injuries, to advocate for individuals with brain injury, and to help others understand what it is like to live with a brain injury.

I often listen to the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the Broadway musical “Les Misérables.” Although some consider the lyrics sad, I find it to be a passionate song that inspires and motivates me. I had dreamed of different dreams before I was injured, but now I have a new dream. And, it is coming true as I help others live again. Join me in fulfilling my dream of a brighter future for everyone living with brain injury by raising awareness of the impact that brain injury has on individuals, their families, and our society.

For more information on how to get involved, please contact: Brain Injury Alliance of New Jersey www.bianj.org (732) 745-0200

Council for the Head Injured Community (CHIC) bianj.org/chic/

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If you or someone you know has recently sustained a traumatic brain injury, you can contact the Tristate Advocacy Project for assistance and consultation. To learn more, visit their website at tristateadvocacy.com or contact them directly at 1.877.774.6380. Translational services are also available for non-English speakers.
My journey as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) began in 2012 on the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Unit at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation (KIR). After managing a catering company for 20 years, I felt a calling to do something that would make a real difference in people’s lives. Upon completion of my certification, my CNA instructor, who happened to be a registered nurse at KIR, recommended that I apply for a position on the TBI Unit.

To be honest, I was nervous. I had studied brain injuries, but to physically care for these patients was a whole different story. But I was an open book, ready to write a new chapter in my career and fully engaged in learning all I could about my patients and their needs. The more insight I gained about brain injury and patient care, the more empowered I became. Slowly, the empty pages began to fill!

Now, I begin each day with a clear head and a focus on my patients’ needs and goals. Some people may believe my job is just toileting, dressing, grooming, and feeding patients, or taking them to therapy sessions. But it goes far beyond that. I am their advocate, cheerleader, confidante, and companion. I listen to the concerns, their fears, and their hopes for the future. I may be their eyes, ears, or voice, and I also strive to be their trusted caregiver.

The complexity of how the human brain functions and the impact of a TBI challenges me every day to learn more. How the combination of care and treatment, therapies and medications, and a patient’s personal drive can produce a positive outcome never ceases to amaze me. The success stories I witness every day continue to motivate me and make me proud to be part of our patients’ journeys. Likewise, I am proud to be a member of the Hospital Council, a Falls Prevention Advocate, and a member of Kessler Foundation’s Stroll ‘N Roll Planning Committee. Above all, I am so very fortunate to work with a dedicated TBI team. Our saying on the unit is simple: “TEAMWORK.” We look out for patients, as well as one another.

I’ll be the first to admit it’s not always easy reporting to the unit for my shift. It can be very overwhelming. We care for a diverse patient population, not only in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background, but also the type of injury which can range from stroke and motor vehicle accidents to gunshots, falls, viruses, tumors, and more. I’ve worked with patients from 16 years of age to 103, and each story is as unique as the people themselves. This level of experience continues to help me grow within the scope of my practice. And, I am grateful that my calling brought me here to Kessler where we work together and use the latest treatments, techniques, technologies, and therapies to give the patients and their loved ones the best possible rehabilitation experience.
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SAVE THE DATE: Moving Forward: Improving Emotional, Physical, and Cognitive Health after Brain Injury

A consumer conference for individuals with brain injury, family members, and friends

Friday, September 27, 2019, 8:15am-3:00pm | Hotel Westminster, 550 West Mount Pleasant Avenue, Livingston, NJ

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