

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

[Listen to the podcast:](#)

JEANNE  
LENGENFELDER: 00:05

It's now my great pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker for this morning, Mimi Hayes. Mimi is an American comedian and author of *I'll Be Okay. It's Just a Hole In My Head*. Mimi wrote her first memoir while recovering from a brain injury at the age of 22. Her honest take on trauma and love followed her to the stage as a stand-up comedian where she performed on stages such as TED Talks, Denver Comedy Works, Broadway Comedy Club, The Moth, Stand Up New York, Danger Fields, PDA Space, and the Upright Citizens Brigade. She has also opened for Jim Gaffigan and Ari Eldjarn and made her headlining debut at the JNKYRD Hamilton. Her one-woman storytelling shows *I'll be Okay* and *Twenty Nothing* have toured at the Edinburgh and Denver Fringe Festivals with rave reviews. Mimi's TED Talk, *Laughter Is Not the Best Medicine*, has reached international audiences and her unique collection of viral TikToks has garnered her millions of views. She has been featured by National Public Radio, the Aneurysm and AVM Foundation, Fox 31 Denver, Mogul, HelloGiggles, and the San Francisco Giants. She is currently working on a documentary, her second book, and running her own business as a writing coach. Her talk today is *Traumedy: how I Turn My Brain Injury into a Punchline*. Please join me in welcoming Mimi Hayes. [applause]

MIMI HAYES: 01:56

Hey, everybody. Thank you so much for that intro. That's a long bio. This feels like one of my comedy shows where nobody wants to sit in the front row. I get it. You don't want me to pick on you, but unfortunately, I'm going to anyway. As mentioned, my name is Mimi Hayes, and I have a brain injury. Before I launch into my talk today, I wanted to run some material by you. How does that sound? Good? Okay, great. It's going to require some more audience participation than you're currently ready to give. So we'll work on that. When I say cere, you say Bellum. Cere.

AUDIENCE: 02:37

Bellum.

HAYES: 02:37

Cere.

AUDIENCE: 02:38

Bellum.

HAYES: 02:39

Okay, we'll work on that. All right. I say cere, you say Bellum. Cere.

AUDIENCE: 02:44

Bellum.

HAYES: 02:45

Cere.

AUDIENCE: 02:46

Bellum.

HAYES: 02:46

Okay. Cool. All right, everybody. Has anybody in this room been on a bad date? Yeah, yeah. How bad? So bad. Has it ever been so bad that you've made a code word with your friend? Yeah, what's your code word? What? Delta Junction? I love it. I'm obsessed. Delta Junction. Mine is Labradoodle. Anybody have been on a date so bad they fake a death in the family? Where are you? Come on. Yeah, you too. Come on, you guys. I mean, my uncle Steve has died like four times this week. It's been traumatic. I'm just kidding, I don't have an Uncle Steve, anymore. Okay, how about this one? Anybody have been on a date so bad that they have a brain hemorrhage? Nice and hi, everybody. Come on. No? During the date? It's me. It happened to me. I

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

think it was in between appetizers and the main entree. And I think he was saying something about 9/11 being an inside job. So if that doesn't give you a stroke, I don't know what will. Come on, you guys, you got to loosen up a little bit, okay? I had a brain bleed while eating cheese fries, okay? Relax. So that's a little bit of my set, you guys. Give it up for me. [applause] So this is me doing stand-up comedy just at my book launch, the best day of my life.

HAYES: 04:28

Having a brain injury is not funny. I'll be the first to say it, but I'm going to talk to you today about how I made it funny because I wanted to. There's nothing funny about it, but I just want to see how you guys take this journey because this is the whole point of why we're here, is mind over matter. There was certainly nothing funny about this photo. I wanted to take myself very seriously. I was 22 years old. This is me. I'm cute as a button on a shoe, right? And I'm about to be a high school teacher. This was really tough. This was the toughest gig I ever had. Here I am, I'm 22, and I'm trying to be a high school teacher, right? This is East High School in downtown Denver. I got this cute little teacher bag. I'm wearing the polka dots, right? I'm like, "I am just too cool for school." Well, my brain had other plans for me. As it turned out, I started getting headaches, one on that date I mentioned. That's a true story. I had a migraine on a blind date. It wasn't a migraine, but I'll get to that later. I started getting all these really weird symptoms, right? So my head was achy. My ears were pounding. I was getting kind of dizzy and nauseous. My vision was getting a little skewy. So that first week as a teacher, I'd take the kids' assignments, and I was like trying to close an eye and read their bad handwriting. And I'm like, "This is all normal. This is what it's like to be a teacher." Right? "This is it. This is my life." But we all know that that's not what's about to happen, right?

HAYES: 06:16

This was getting so bad that I ended up in the ER with my mom. I took my mom to the ER with me because I was scared and I was 22. We'd been to a couple appointments before the ER. I guess I'm skipping around in the story because I have a brain injury, and that's what we do. I'd gone to my doctor that week for a different reason. I was trying to explain to her that I didn't feel right. And she's like, "Have you been through a breakup lately?" And I was like, "Yes, I have." She was like, "Oh, you're just a millennial. You're just sad." She literally just prescribed me Valium and told me to sleep it off. Yes, your eyebrows disappeared into your hairline. That's real. So my mom is like, "I'm not really buying that. I'm not really buying that. I mean, yes, you're a millennial. Yes, you're kind of a sad girl right now. But that can't be it." We go to an urgent care. We go to an ER. We finally land in the first ER, and I'm reporting double vision because the neurologist puts his finger in front of my face and does this, says, "Do you see double?" I said, "Yeah, totally." And then he said, "Ah, it looks like your ears are all plugged up there, kiddo." And then he sends me on my way. Yeah, yeah. I don't know what he saw in my ears, earwax, I don't know.

HAYES: 07:38

So we left, and my mom was really not having it. My mom, I swear by the end of this story, in every hospital, she probably was on their bulletin board in the break room. They're like, "Beware of this woman. Do not engage." So we're trying to call my doctor. We're like, "No, we just went to the ER. Something is wrong. We don't know what it is." And my mom literally takes the phone out of my hands, talking to my doctor. And she's like, "We're going back to the ER. We don't care what you say. We'll meet you there." I mean, my doctor's not going to meet us at the ER. They don't do

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

that. But we go back to the ER. And another nurse tries to do that finger test, but they're doing it wrong, according to my mom. They only put the finger right here. And they said, "Are you seeing double?" And I said, "No." My mom stepped in front of her or body-checked her into a trash can. I can't remember which. And said, "No, it's like this. Do you see double now? Do you see double now?" And if you looked in my eyes, they twisted kind of like a little pinball machine. That's not good. Eyeballs are not supposed to do that. So they said, "Okay, fine. We'll do an MRI." And my mom's like, "Yeah, what now?" She's like, "We live here. We'll wait. I don't care how long it takes. We own this MRI." So we have an MRI, and you'll never guess what happened, you guys. The nurse came in and told my mother. The nurse didn't even tell me. She told my mom, "Your daughter's brain is bleeding." And then she left the room.

HAYES: 09:26

Yeah, it was like a bad date. I'm like, "Do I call you? Are you going to call me?" She was going to have a phone call with the neurosurgeon, but I didn't know that. All I knew was that I was in an ER room at 3 o'clock in the morning having a panic attack. They didn't tell me if I was going to die. So I was like, "Cool, I'm going to die probably in five minutes. Countdown begins now." And I started to go through my head about how I felt about that. And honestly, I was pretty pissed off. I was like, "I didn't even get to go to Europe. I didn't even get married or change any kids' lives. I was the teacher for all of five days, and now I'm here." So I was having a panic attack, and my mom was putting blankets on me, just like one after another, saying, "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay." And I'm like, "Jesus, where is this lady getting all these blankets? God, this woman." And it was really scary. And then I didn't die. Spoiler. But when they came back in the room, they told me that I'd had a cavernous angioma rupture in my cerebellum and that I was stable. I did not feel stable. I felt anything but stable, actually. But they said I could go on home, to which my mom was like, "Are you asking for a death wish right now? Are you trying to get slapped?" She said, "No, we're going to stay here and talk to your neurosurgeon." So we stayed the weekend in the hospital, met this very nice man, Dr. Crawford. And he said, "Yeah, you are stable. We don't know what's going to happen to this bleed. It's over here in your cerebellum. And it could shrink. It could grow. We don't know, but we want you to go home, chill out, stop at going on dates, stop trying to be a teacher, just chill the hell out."

HAYES: 11:25

So I went on bed rest for four or five weeks, which is hard to do for someone like me. I am not a bedrest girly. I do everything all the time. I'm planning dates. I'm planning lessons. But hey, I got to watch a lot of Netflix. So I was sitting on the couch. I'm 22. All my friends are getting married and going to grad school, right? But when I got home from the hospital, I did not hesitate to tell the internet, because I'm a millennial, what was happening. This is how I phrased it. "Mimi Hayes is feeling thankful." That's true. "Update for friends and family after three long days, many pokes and MRIs, and truly lovely nurse visits. I've been released from the hospital on good behavior. I will be resting at home for the next three to four weeks while my brain heals. My stability and vision are still kind of impaired. Picture a drunk person, haha. But I am otherwise fine. But don't you think--" Ooh, she gets sassy over here. "Don't you think for one second that some silly brain hammer" - I spelled that word wrong, okay? - "will keep me down. You heard me, Denver half marathon. I'm coming for you in October, baby." Okay, so a couple things to unpack there. I was training for a half marathon. That's true. And was somehow convinced that this brain hemorrhage

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

was not going to keep me from doing such in a few weeks' time. Also, 46 likes. Are you fucking kidding me? Come on, these polls are like 300 these days. God.

HAYES: 13:13

Anyway, moving on. So I go home. I'm chilling like a villain. Except I'm not. Except I'm totally not chilling. I am not otherwise fine. I am panicking. And I'm Googling. Can you die of cavernous angioma? Yeah. Top hit, the majority of cavernous angioma lesions don't bleed. And ones that do normally don't bleed suddenly and quickly, but they leak slowly. So that would explain my fatigue that summer. The migraine on the date. Risks of any surgery, including cavernous angioma, stroke, paralysis, coma, or death. Holy shit. No, don't like that. So I had a choice here. I want to clarify. I was not a comedian at this point in time. I mean, I wasn't humorless, but I did improv in college. I was a theater kid. I liked to be on stage. I'm a middle child. I'm an attention whore, okay? But not a comedian. So where is this coming from, the stuff that I do now? Well, I will tell you, I am not unique in this way. Oh, first there's this. Okay. So you've all seen this movie, right? Because I was Googling, because I was doing all of this scary research, I had a choice to make, and that was, am I going to give in to this fear, or am I going to ignore it? And I chose to ignore it, okay, through jokes, one of which was that my mom had hired my friends to take me on walks in that little interval, in those bedrest days. She called them my Mimi handlers so that I wouldn't atrophy or have a blood clot. They have to take me on walks a couple times a day like a dog, okay?

HAYES: 15:10

Now, as the weeks started to go by, I started having more and more trouble on these walks. The walks would get shorter. They would get more troublesome. My arm became a little T-Rex arm up here. And my left leg started to drag like this. And I would trip. And then I would tell my friend, if you were looking for the curb, I found it, and they would freak out. But on one walk in particular, I had my friends replay this scene, and I would drag myself down the sidewalk, and I'd stop. I'd say, "I'm tired. I want to go home now." And then I'd be like, "Okay, you guys, now you go. Oh, no, we're in the middle of a desert. What do we do?" And again, they would have a hard time playing along with this because they're like, "Why? This isn't funny," right? So here we go. I am not alone in this behavior. This is called Gallo's humor. And I have a great example of this from Viktor Frankl. He was a Holocaust survivor, and he wrote the book *Man's Search for Meaning*. He says, "We were overcome by a grim sense of humor. This is in the concentration camps in Auschwitz. We knew that we had nothing to lose except our so ridiculously naked lives. When the showers started to run, we all tried very hard to make fun, both about ourselves and about each other. After all, real water did flow from the sprays." When I saw this quote, I was like, "Victor, that is fucked up." But this is how we cope. I am not unique in this way. We see this in a lot of emergency responders, healthcare professionals, firefighters. They have to make fun of their situation to survive. It is a survival technique that we see with a lot of people who go through trauma, right?

HAYES: 17:12

And that's exactly what I was doing. That's why I told all my friends the night before my brain surgery that my surgeon was going to go in there with an ice cream scoop. Yeah. My mom is a psychologist. She knew what I was doing. She's seen my talks before. She does think I'm funny, but not this. Her trauma replayed every day. I feel bad for the lady. Really, I do. And I also feel really bad about this thing that I did, which was to write a letter to my family the night before my brain surgery. I don't recommend this, by the way. It says, "To be destroyed." I did not intend on them

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

finding this? Okay? "Dear family, if anyone finds this, it means something bad happened today. Whoops. I just want all of you to know that I love you so much and my time on this earth has been pleasant because of you. Wow, it's weird to actually write something like this. I hope you don't ever have to read this. I know in my heart that we will be together again, probably tomorrow, because you don't actually need to read this because I'm fine. And I've already destroyed this letter and joked to you all about writing it. This is ridiculous. I'm going to bed. See you tomorrow. You'll never see this letter. Also, Tucker," - that was our golden labradoodle, okay? - "stay golden. And sorry about all the leftovers I left in the fridge. One more thing. I have a diary lying around somewhere. Happy hunting. Love M." Yeah, okay.

HAYES: 18:45

Again, a lot to unpack here. I think what breaks my heart the most about this letter that I did not intend on my family seeing is that second to last paragraph there, the leftovers I left in the fridge. It's the night before I might possibly never see anything ever again. And all I can think is that I'm such a burden. "Man, I'm really bad at eating my leftovers. And I always leave that in the fridge. Someone's going to have to clean that up. Man." I mean, that breaks me, honestly. And then happy hunting about the diary. I'm embarrassed to say this, but the only young person I knew that had died was Anne Frank, and she had diaries, and I had diaries, except hers were a lot more poetic. And mine was just like my hoe phase just like documenting it. Anyway, my parents have since seen this letter. And yeah, it's really hard for them to see this now, too. This whole thing I'm doing, I don't know if anyone else has called it this, but this is what I call it. I call it Traumedy, the art of making one's trauma into a comedic material with some success. I think I heard you laughing. My ears still work. I think I heard you laughing at some of my jokes. But it's a process. It's funneling all that trauma into something that is creative and useful and can bring somebody else maybe a little bit of joy. So that's what I do. I'm really getting my steps in over here.

HAYES: 20:17

All right. But the truth remained that I was still scared and that no joke could really take away from the truth of the situation. And this is actually from a couple of years ago, so I could probably update this data here. But the annual rate of rupture this-- is from the Aneurysm Foundation, I think. People in the US, 8 to 10 per 100,000 people or 30,000 people in the US suffer a brain aneurysm rupture. There's a brain aneurysm rupturing every 18 minutes. Ruptured brain aneurysms are fatal. In about 40% of cases of those who survive, about 66% suffer some permanent neurological deficit. Okay. So during that month of bed rest, I was in deficit. I was fully disabled. I was seeing double full-time. I'd lost 20 pounds, which at the time I was excited about because of my ex-boyfriend. But that's a sick kind of weight loss. Nobody looks good when they're losing that kind of weight. And I was honestly really scared going into that brain surgery that that could be it. Maybe I'm going to be one of those statistics there. And if I do make it, maybe I'm never going to be the same again. And there was nothing funny about that. So when I come out of brain surgery - and trigger warning, this is a little graphic - first thing I remember was the nurse pulling a yellow tube out of my throat. And I said, "Am I dead?" And she said, "No." And I said, "Are you dead?" She said, "No." I said, "Okay, I'm just checking." And then I proceeded to ask her why her and the other nursing staff had flipped my bed on its side and strapped me to it.

HAYES: 22:15

I thought they were playing a prank on me because this was my vision. It's still really hard for me to look at that slide. I was seeing double and now sideways. And they're

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

taking note of this in their little clipboards. They're like, "Okay, interesting." The brain is a funny thing. Even funnier, though, oh, this room. Okay, who has been to the anesthesia room? Anybody? Yeah. This place is so lit. Okay, they put you in this room with other drugged-up people coming out of major surgeries. It's such a fun place. I want to work there. I want to volunteer there, honestly. You don't even have to pay me. So I come out of surgery. I'm seeing double and sideways. They wheel me down to the anesthesia room. I'm yelling at this guy for ice chips. I'm having a jolly old time. And I can't see anything, right? I'm seeing double and sideways. But I just hear. I'm hearing these nurses and they're yelling at a woman named Helen. And they're like, "Helen. Sit down, Helen. Hey, don't go over there. Hey, Helen, don't pull this out of your arms. Helen, Helen, you can't do that. Helen, we're going to call somebody. Helen, Helen, Helen, Helen, Helen." And I just like-- okay, so this is me, right? And they never gave me a neck brace. I'm still salty about that. They cut through my skull there. No neck brace. But I just kind of like try to get my head up like this. And I'm like, "Helen! Wherever you are, sit down, Helen. Sit the fuck down."

HAYES: 23:59

And then everyone started laughing. And I was like, "What is the big deal? Why can't she just chill?" Well, I don't even know if she's real. I'm going to be honest with you. I don't know if Helen is real. If you see her, tell her I'm looking for her, okay? It's a weird place. And I was scared. I was really, really-- this was the scariest place in the world. Don't let me fool you. It really was. I think somebody flatlined next to me in the ICU. It was really intense and really scary. But again, all I could do was make fun of it. That's all I could think to do when I discovered a catheter. Anybody ever had a catheter before? Show of hands. Not super fun? And I didn't think I approved that. I was like, "What? Is that a straw? Who did this to me?" I was really upset. But my reaction was to call it my secret potty device. And then anytime my friends would come to visit me, I'd be like, "Well, watch out. There's a bucket on the floor. I'm peeing in it. Woo-woo!" Again, all that's underneath this is like sheer fear that I will never be right again, but this is all I can do to just get through. Okay, there she is. After brain surgery in the ICU, October 3rd, 2014. That's an elephant on my head. Yeah. And I'm smiling. Look at my smile. I find this just so interesting. I just am smiling through this whole thing. The next step after brain surgery is they try to send me home, again, shocker. They just want to get rid of me, right?

HAYES: 25:50

Like, "Who's this clown? Get her out of here." Again, my mom was like, "No, I don't think we should go home. I think we need another thing to happen." And they took me down to this place called Spaulding Rehab Center in Aurora, Colorado. I'd never been to a rehab center. My only concept of this place was similar to my grandma when she was in assisted living. And she had like an apartment and like a Keurig. And then somebody would come through and check her blood pressure every once in a while. So I was like, "That's where I'm going. Cool. Great. Rehab. Sign me up." And they wheel me in and it's a hospital. I was ugly crying. I was not prepared for another hospital. But this is truly where I needed to be. And I am honestly so lucky to have been given the opportunity to go to this place and heal, okay? These people did amazing things. They retaught me how to walk, how to see, how to speak. I mean, I never really did shut up, but they did a lot of speech therapy with me, too. And it was amazing the kind of work that we did in there. This is Jamie. She was my occupational therapist. And one of our first activities when I got in there was to open some medicine bottles with my left hand. I couldn't do it. I was weeping. And she just like



## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

got down on-- and was just like, "You're so brave." And I was like, "I'm not brave. I can't even open a medicine bottle."

HAYES: 27:23

Yeah, that emotional center was pretty wrecked. This is Vicky. She was my physical therapist. Also on the second floor, she is known as Attila the Hun. Really no nonsense. There was one day I thought I was really going to lose my head because I had this crazy idea that I was going to go down the dining hall, but I didn't like to follow the rules. I didn't really know there were rules in hospitals. I'm 22. I can do what I want, right? There are rules on what level of transportation you can take. So I was on the wheelchair-only track. I disregarded that. I took my walker to the dining hall one day. And I just kind of like, "Oh, this is really hard." Mosey on down to the dining hall. And then I was eating my breakfast. And Vicki comes. And she's like, "What are you doing?" I was like, "Having breakfast. How are you?" She's like, "How'd you get here?" I was like, "I took my walk." "Where's your wheelchair?" "In my room." And she just like got down on my level. She was like, "You can't do that." I was like, "I'm in trouble now." But she was amazing. If you're wondering, yes, that's my Halloween costume. My father made it. It's made of foam, industrial foam. There was a big to-do about this costume because my surgery was in October, so obviously I wanted to party on Halloween as a brain. I told my parents, since my dad's an architect, my mom, and they wanted this to be this really crazy costume. So dad went to the hardware store and spent all Saturday with the electric turkey carver.

FEMALE 1: 29:17

This independence tag. That means she's independent to walk on her own.

HAYES: 29:23

Yes. So that's the independence tag I later gained once I was allowed to. Vicki and me walking down a hill.

FEMALE 1: 29:32

This is what her four-square-step test used to look like. Go.

HAYES: 29:42

I'm so dramatic, you guys.

FEMALE 1: 29:44

And of course I was holding on. And it took her 40 seconds to do this. But now we're going to adjust it again. Now note that she can bend over. She would have been on her face forward before. So now, this test, which took her 40 seconds the first time, 8.7 seconds is the norm. I'm going to get my timer and I'm going to start it. And go.

HAYES: 30:30

Whoa. Speedy Gonzalez.

FEMALE 1: 30:35

Okay, ladies and gentlemen, that was 5.8 seconds. Yesterday, when she did this, it was 7.3 seconds. All right.

HAYES: 30:49

I was very excited as you can tell. [laughter] That little, I call it the broomstick test. I was reenacting it because I wish I had gotten footage of the first day, although probably I didn't wish that, because I was weeping the entire time, and Vicki was holding me with a gate belt, and I was like, "I can't do this." So probably for the best, we didn't catch it on camera, but I reenacted it, and then I redid it, and obviously, huge leaps and bounds from where we started. And then there was all the time I was alone in my room.

[silence]

HAYES: 31:45

Oh, that hurt. Yeah, the look of disappointment. [laughter] Let's see what else. Okay. So yeah, so how do we get from there to where we are today? So glad you asked. So I

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

did go back to the classroom a lot faster than I should have, some would say, I would say. I showed back up. I had those same kids for student teaching, the ones that I had - oh, I forgot to tell you this story. Oh, man. Okay, backtrack. Sorry again. Just yeah, the journey. The day that I found out I was having brain surgery, the first thing I wanted to do was go and tell my high school students because the high school was right across the street from the hospital. And when you're about to have a brain surgery, nobody can tell you shit. You could probably get a bunch of dogs or something if you wanted to puppies. But I was like, I want to go see my high school students. And my parents were like, "Okay, odd choice. Odd flex. Okay." But I came in there with my cane, and I was looking like death. And I was like, "Hey, you guys, how's it going? How's school? You doing your assignments?" And they're like, "Oh my God." And one of them did bravely raise their hand and was like, "Miss, are you going to die?" And I was like [laughter], "Good joke. Are you going to die? [laughter] Oh, my God." And I did have a panic attack that night. And it was questions like that that I hadn't considered them. I just hadn't considered them. I was too busy making jokes and watching my Netflix and have my friends over. I just didn't really-- it didn't click until much later.

HAYES: 33:37

And so I went back to the classroom. The kids welcomed me, but it was really hard. And it was hard for a lot of reasons, because teaching in a public school is hard, but also because I had a brain injury. And all my symptoms were now just part of my life, so I could hear everything. I was like a little squirrel. You may have noticed today. I hear someone's phone. And I'm like, "Hello? What? What's going on?" I could hear every little sound. The fluorescent lights were always a problem. I lived in darkness. I would turn all the lights off and had lamps instead. It was really, really hard. But as it turned out, I was doing a little something on the side while I was teaching. I was writing a book. This also started out as a joke. On one of those gump walks, my friend was like, you should write a book. You're deranged. You got a lot to say. Maybe Oprah will like it or something. So I was like, "Okay." And so I went back to my little laptop. And the very first word of it used to be-- it didn't make it to the final cut, but it was, "I am writing a book. This is going to take a very long time," because I couldn't use my left hand to type anymore. So as I started teaching, I started exploring this life that I was living. And I started documenting all these weird things. The catheter, Helen, Vicky, being in a rehab center, and you're the youngest one in there, and you're making friends. I was really just trying to understand what my life was at that point. So I was just dumping it all into a big document.

HAYES: 35:24

Well, eventually, that got out of control. And it turned out I had quite a story. And so what else was I doing? Oh, I started doing a stand-up comedy. Yeah, yeah. So I got a lot of stage presence working with the kids, but I kind of started getting on stage like one open mic a week, Friday nights in this little CD dive bar. And I would get up there and I'd be like, "Oh, I almost died. Isn't that funny?" And then nobody would laugh. They'd be like, "Okay, good job. Okay." So I really wasn't funny at first. I had a lot of work to do, but I knew that what I was going through was like exceptional and interesting, at least. So I started doing stand-up. I started writing this book. And at a certain point, I'm like, "You know what? Let's just shake it up. Let's just leave the classroom." Here's me in the classroom. They did steal that selfie stick, yeah, that we're using there. Did go missing. But also this kid in the corner, I don't know if you can see him up there trying to leave. Yeah, yeah. It was really tough. But look how



## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

happy I am, with those kiddos. But after two years, I was like, "I can't do this anymore. You know what I'm going to do? I want to move to New York City." So I can be a part of it. Sorry about that. I'm sorry. I am. And I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know anybody in New York City. Had I even been there, to be honest? I don't even know. I just had this weird feeling that that's where I needed to be. And I wanted to publish this book, and I knew that there was going to be connections there in New York City. So I went and I moved there with nothing. Two bags and my manuscript. And within a month of being there, I met somebody who knew somebody who published my book. So pretty damn cool.

HAYES: 37:20

I kept doing stand-up, and I kept exploring what was it that was funny about my brain injury? Was there anything funny about it? Could I make people laugh about almost dying? And it was tough. I had a lot of pushback. I had comedians' friends who were like, "Just talk about being a teacher or something or being a little white girl. Stop with this brain stuff. It freaks people out. People don't want to talk about death." And so I listened to that, and I stopped doing my brain comedy for a while. And then a couple of years into New York, I was teaching a stand-up performance and writing class. And I'm like, "Yeah, you guys, you got to find what's most unique about you and really commit." And one of my students just goes, "Yeah, when's the last time you've done a joke about your brain injury?" And I was like, "Right you are. Okay, back to work." I really committed to this in a lot of ways, not only in the comedy clubs, but I wrote a one-woman show about it based off of the book and the diagnosis and the people I met and everything that's in that book that you saw walking in is also one woman's show. So I started that adventure, and I went to Scotland, and I toured, and I met amazing people, and I told my story, and I cried with people. This experience really opened the door to nothing that that little 22-year-old could have ever imagined could have ever pictured for my life. And I'm really grateful that all that stuff happened and is happening. I mean, I'm here today, which still kind of blows my mind.

HAYES: 39:05

But. Oh no. The thing is, that used to be where this talk ended. Back when the book came out and I was doing keynotes and stuff, that was where it ended. I was like, "And I'm a successful author and comedian, haha." So that used to be the end of the talk. In 2023, I was-- oh, was it the man? I think that's the common denominator, you guys. I don't want to blame men for my brain injuries, but there is something connected here. I had a really bad migraine. I was actually in Scotland when I had the migraine. We went to the ER and they didn't do any scans. They gave me some weak, yeah, really weak stuff, aspirin, exactly. And they said, when you get back to LA-- because I was then living in LA, when you get back to LA, get a scan. I was like, "All right. Sure, no problem." I go in for a CT scan January of 2023. And I'm texting my friend. And they're like, "Okay, great. Just wait in the lobby for 10 minutes," because CTs are quick, right? So I was like, "Great. I'll get my results in 10 minutes, be out of here. Go get a sandwich or something." And they roll up with a wheelchair. And I'm like, "Oh, shit, is that for me?" They're like, "We're going to take you down to the ER." So unfortunately, it was revealed I had a second brain bleed in the same place. Yeah, lightning does strike twice. And here I am, again, smiling with the juice box and my little soggy sandwich. And I got to say, this is crazy.

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

HAYES: 40:59

There was so much I learned from this second one, so much processing that happened that never took place the first time around. All that like, "I'm going to make this into a punchline and a comedy routine. And this is my past life," right? Isn't that cool how I overcame all that? And here I am with a second bleed, a second time. I am glad to tell you it's been stable for about a year. So I'm on the six-month MRI plan, right? Got my little punch card. We're watching it. Anytime I have a weird symptom, I'll email my doctor. It was quite scary. The few months after this photo was taken, I was having all those same symptoms again. I was losing my taste. I was seeing double. I was feeling weak on my left side. My pupils, man, they dilate. They're like, "Wow." It looked like a scary little vampire. So all that stuff was happening again. And the first thing I can think is just like, "All right. You got to do the work now. You really got to process all that stuff you didn't before." And what I really love right now is that I'm actively in therapy and processing all this stuff. And what's crazy is I didn't go to therapy until way, way later into my journey. And I was going to therapy for everything else. I was getting physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy. I never went to mental health, me therapy. How are you doing? I just kind of shut all that down. And so I'm happy to say I'm stable working with my therapist on my PTSD, post Todd stress disorder, whatever that guy's name was the first time. I don't know. Is he here tonight? Anybody?

HAYES: 42:46

Wouldn't that be crazy if the guy that was there on that date with me? Anyway, that's just a fantasy of mine that one day we'll meet again. So I filmed this for myself because I knew going in the second time, this is my same brain surgeon. Again, skipping around the story. This is the guy that did my brain surgery in 2014. So luckily, I was able to get back with him. And I had lived in New York City, in LA, and Scotland, and all these places. And he had also lived in other places, too. I had a crush on him. I was a little jealous that he was seeing other patients, but to be fair, I was seeing other doctors. And we had to go in and see him. And we had this visit, and I filmed it because I was like, "I'm not going to remember what he's going to say." And I knew I might faint. I was really anxious, right? The word benign is not a bad word, but it triggered my vasal, bagel, syncope, faint, whatever, fight, flight, faint, like a goat thing. I've been doing this since I was a kid. And that's exactly what my mom says. She does this. Just ignore her. And I fainted, because I was really stressed out. We were looking at the two scans and seeing it was the same spot, not quite as big. Why? We don't know. Benign. Woo, there she goes. And this visit, I brought my parents to because it was very important that they'd be there for me. But we're getting towards the end of the visit with Dr. Crawford. And my mom goes, so Dr. Crawford, did you get the book?

HAYES: 44:32

So a couple years ago when the book came out, my mom, her friend, was getting back surgery by Dr. Crawford. And so I signed a book for him, and she gave it to him. And just to be clear, this book does kind of detail how much I want to bang him. It's not the only theme. It's not the only theme, I swear to God, but it is in there. But I'm like, it's fine. He's never going to read it. I'm never going to see him again. [laughter] So she says, "Did you get the book?" And he said, "Yeah." And I threw myself out the window. No, he said, "Yeah, I read it." And this guy, this suave, suave, distinguished man. He was like, "There's a whole side of our patients' lives we never get to see. [laughter] And it's truly captivating." Oh my God. Yeah, so I don't know if he's still

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

single. I haven't seen a ring. So just keeping that open and available. This is one of my viral TikToks, too. I was just like, "I'm going to put it up there because it's funny," right? Like 6 million views. So pretty good step up from 46 likes, I would say. But no, why is it in there twice? I don't know. Yeah, so what this whole experience has really taught me is like my trauma's not funny. There's really nothing funny about having panic attacks. I had one actually a couple days ago. That was really not funny. But there's nothing funny about it. There's nothing funny about the lasting scars of that trauma, the relationships that change because of the trauma, how I've changed because of the trauma.

HAYES: 46:37

And I like to joke about it. But there's some really deep-seated things in there that I'm continuously working on. There's symptoms I will always have to deal with. There's a second bleed in there I have to manage. But I don't want people to feel bad for me. I don't feel bad for me. I feel really good about my life and what I've been able to do and the people I've been able to reach. I'm still a teacher. I'm just doing it on bigger stages now. And I'm really happy about that. So this has all really taught me to listen to myself, to if I feel that gurgling sense of dread, like ask myself a few questions. Like, "Have you had any water today? How many cups of coffee have you had today? Have you fed yourself today? Do you want to talk to somebody today? Do you need to journal or write or call somebody? What do you need to do?" I can't just joke that away. It's the thing that everyone says, "How you doing?" "I'm fine. I'm good. I'm okay." We don't have to say that. We really don't. We can be honest. And I really love when people come up to me after the talk or just seeing an MI content and being like, "Thank you for being honest when you're not okay." Because the book is called I'll Be Okay, but I really didn't know if I was going to be okay. And so I think that this really taught me to have more of those conversations with people, like, "What's really going on with you and your heart and your soul." So that's very deep.

HAYES: 48:09

And again, my family's been through so much. And I think it's amazing that they can watch my content and be in my audiences sometimes. They're not rolling around laughing. But they get what I'm doing. They understand what I'm doing. They respect what I'm doing. And they're strong people too. I gave this talk to some college kids recently. And one of them came up to me, and she's like-- has a chronic illness, and she wanted to tell me about that. And I was like, "Great. Tell me more." And she was like, "Well, I do what you do. I joke about it. And my mom doesn't get it. She's not laughing with me." And I was like, "Yeah, makes sense? That tracks? Yeah." I said, "She's having her own experience with your chronic illness. Think about it from her point of view. She's watching her child go through this chronic illness. Maybe you don't have answers like you want to. And I get what you're doing. I see that you're doing it for survival. But yeah, she's probably not going to laugh along with you, and that's okay. You can still do what you're doing to make yourself feel better. But she's probably not going to be in on the joke with you, or helping you work on that punchline." "That makes sense." Yeah, so this is me. This is my time. I just want to thank the Kessler Foundation for having me, for finding me. I don't know how you guys found me online, but you did. And I'm grateful for everyone that's here. I'd love to talk to you all after this and during the day. My book is over there. I really don't want to take them home with me, so please come talk to me. They're really heavy. But yeah, I just appreciate these spaces and having the opportunity to talk to other

## Traumedy-How I Turned My Brain Injury into a Punch Line with Mimi Hayes – Transcript

survivors. I'd love to hear your story. Come talk my ear off. And thank you so much for having me. [applause]

ANNOUNCER: 50:07

If you couldn't make it to our Mind Over Matter live event, you can still be part of the journey to recovery through our inspiring podcast series. Hear from experts, connect with others facing similar challenges, and discover strategies for maintaining a healthy mindset. Whether you're a survivor, caregiver, or healthcare professional, this podcast series is your opportunity to embrace positivity and empower yourself and others after a traumatic brain injury. Look for the Event Podcast link in our program notes. Tune in to our podcast series lately. Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Be sure and subscribe to our SoundCloud channel Kessler Foundation for more research updates. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcast, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded on September 26, 2024, and was edited and produced by Joan Bank Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation. Tune in to our podcast series lately. Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Be sure and subscribe to our SoundCloud channel Kessler Foundation for more research updates. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcast, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded on September 26, 2024, and was edited and produced by Joan Bank Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation.