



HEADSTRONG

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CASS' CORNER



Life with Acquired Brain Injury

I am fortunate in that I have an all-encompassing list of article topics to choose from, when composing pieces for the Hamilton Brain Injury Association's regularly-published newsletter. Regular readers will know that I have previously written pieces regarding sports and brain injury (chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, for instance). As well, I have composed more than one article on music, the incredible therapy music and lyrics can provide ABI victims and I have even written, on concussions and the harm and/or effects they can have on individuals.

Poring over the list we have put together, I see a course, for my next several writings. All, of course, will deal, directly with the Hamilton Brain Injury Association and the recoveries each of us has endured. I note a film I intend to write about and examine, the importance our clubhouse at 822 Main Street projects, illustrates and provides and perhaps even touch on rehabilitation requirements and experiences any number of us have endured and continue to undergo.

The topic I choose to examine today, hmm . . . it kind of 'draws its own map,' in a way. As per usual, it will and would be easy for me to talk about activities I select, to fill my own daily activities. Rather than dwell entirely on myself, however, I shall delve into the lives of additional group members, as well.

Yes, each of us has endured a traumatic accident or experience which has entirely altered our existence, our activities, oftentimes even our livelihoods. Myself, I was an elementary school teacher in the States for a number of years. That was a fulfilling life choice and career and one, certainly, that I sometimes regret having left behind. The tangible rewards I received, by virtue of teaching young children (certified kindergarten through Grade 8 but primarily instructed those in the first grade or two of their education), are immeasurable.

The joy I felt, each day that I entered the classroom was as tangible to me as the smiles I regularly saw on my pupils' faces and heard in their fairly-constant and often unmuted laughter. We had a wonderful time in my classes.

Yes, we would regularly watch movies that I felt connected to my students and, whether it was teaching them lessons in life, as a film like Gene Wilder's "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory" did or even brought more 'adult' lessons in life to the forefront, as a film like Robin Williams' "Hook" might, I know my classes learned, while generally in a state, too, of enjoying their time in our classroom.

The classes 'were not about me,' as, so often, our HBIA gatherings may focus on a particular individual; our gatherings were about the kids. About their lives, their joys, friends they had, experiences they shared and, sometimes, even, with challenges that regularly faced them.

Does that not, rather, sound like a map of our lifetimes, now, being required to face life, overcome endeavours, complete tasks, raise families and still enjoy our day-to-day activities? I see absolute parallels, too, certainly at earlier stages of our recovery efforts, between us, as adults, and younger children, in their earlier stages of education. Lessons we must learn all over again. Habits we must either redevelop or cultivate anew; relationships we must invest in and prosper from.

This was the sort of activity that filled my days. In talking with other members of our regularly-scheduled groups, I learned of additional day-to-day activities that filled the hours and days of others . . .

One of these individuals is Mr. Dave Gaylor. We used to meet, regularly, to attend Hamilton Bulldog Ontario Hockey League games, together. We always had a grand time watching these contests and I must say I have missed his once-regular attendance at these competitions with me.

A primary reason he has been unable, for the past three years,, to join me for the Bulldog games is because of volunteer work he does, himself, for the Dundas Real McCoys hockey team! Now, I must acknowledge that I am, again, fortunate, in that he has extended invitations to me, to join him at said matches. Unfortunately, our paths do not seem to cross as often, any longer, as busy as we each are, with our daily activities.

Dave's efforts to help out at Real McCoys' games extend well into those a formal employee would be responsible for, in their capacity. His efforts extend beyond mere ushering; as a matter of fact, there is no actual 'ushering' at the Dundas hockey games or in the league. Yes, he assists fans in any way that is possible. These desires from fans may include locating any desired team or player information. Perhaps they will appreciate help in finding their way to their desired seating area or wholly enjoying the game, as a Canadian hockey fan deserves to. I am proud, on Dave's behalf, to note, however, that his efforts move far past the sports spectrum.

As well, Dave assists in selling programs at the rink, in providing whatever help is asked or need with 50/50 ticket sales, in making sure the referees, 'themusic guy,' game stats recorder and timer are paid and any other general assistance that is needed at the game.

Mr. Gaylor works, as well, in various capacities, in the well-regarded rehabilitation program, at Hamilton's General Hospital. He works in a volunteer capacity in the Resource Centre helping with researching information and on the ABI (Acquired Brain Injury) floor, at providing any information he is able or allowed to, regarding curiosities they may have, or even, I would imagine, his own felt experiences, he having endured brain trauma, himself.

Dave extends himself far beyond what many individuals do, and his efforts at the hospital are greatly appreciated. What better person, after all, would visitors want information or assistance from, than 'one who has been there?' Dave's volunteer efforts and mine help to illustrate the capabilities that not only we, but any number of other ABI victims have pursued.

I sit here at my computer and sort of 'cast the proverbial eye' around the table at our clubhouse. "HOW can anybody," I think, "POSSIBLY believe that so many of us do not push ourselves to an incredible level in order to assist and function in society, as a typical member?!!"

In my mind's eye, for instance, Rachael comes to mind, first. Aside from being a valued and regular attendee at clubhouse meetings, she works, as well, as an Avon representative. Now, I have never served in that capacity, but I am aware of the all-but constant efforts she puts into it, in order to make herself the success in that field that she has.

In addition to capacities with the make-up giant, she also has extensive experience working her flea-market booth, in Brantford. Push, push, push . . . Rachael is always working. Her desire to assist in clubhouse activities knows no bounds and her efforts are always much appreciated by so many of us, program co-ordinator Adria Simas, included.

Travis, too! Yes, prior to his mishap, he was able to enjoy fuller employment in custodial and cleanup capacities. Now, no, he is not able to maintain the same arduous schedule he once was, but he is still on the job, putting his all into it.

Such a number of us, even following our respective traumas, are not able to just 'fold it up and move on.'

Oh, geez! You know who I forgot to mention, who plays an enormous role in our group, at not only being a delight to hear from in group but to admire as an incredibly active member, herself? Azure-Lee.

Az, on her first day as a teacher, suffered her accident. The disappointment and frustration she feels is palpable, but she is one of the biggest go-getters of all, in HBIA. We are fortunate to see her and her incredibly supportive family at HBIA events and it is a joy to do so.

No, she has not been yet able to continue as a classroom teacher, but her example helps instruct each one of us as we hear of her abundant activities outside of the clubhouse. These activities include sailing Lake Ontario's blue waters, perching atop a horse as she partakes in summertime equestrian activities, scaling a rock-climbing wall or simply being the 'take-no-guff' personality that she is. Azure-Lee is a fine illustration of what it takes to overcome obstacles like those presented to each of us. Look up 'determination' in the dictionary and you will likely see her countenance illustrated adjacent to the definition!

Every single one of us has achieved myriad accomplishments. From V, and his endless walks up and down the Mountain stairs, Barry's efforts at photography and collecting, any of a number of us in our respective roles as devoted spouses. It's a tough world, but we continue to do what we are able to make our way through it. Bring it on, life . . . we're ready for you!!