



## Lila Holmen

A survivor story  
Click the link to read Lila's story.

Did you know that June is Brain Injury Awareness Month in Canada? This month, we're shining a spotlight on Brain Injury. Help us raise awareness about brain injury in Canada by following along with our posts & sharing our posts with your friends!

**#SPOTLIGHTONBRAININJURY**

I was 43 and had recently relocated to Saskatchewan when I acquired a severe brain injury from a motor vehicle accident. It was late afternoon and approaching dusk just before Christmas in 2003. My daughter who had just months earlier graduated from high school decided to accompany me on this work-related trip in my little hatchback. As we slowed down to the posted 80 kmph on the highway, a commercial truck proceeded across it from a side road causing me to t-bone it. Leah and I were knocked unconscious but she came to immediately while I did not. She was alert to the aftermath with both of us grievously injured and my head resting on her lap. Being trapped inside the wreckage while EMS worked for 40 minutes freeing us from the twisted metal is a memory that comes back to her in nightmares.

We were taken by helicopter to Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon where they repaired my ruptured aorta with a left ventricle bypass. During that surgery I suffered a stroke. Leah had an MRI which revealed an old acquired brain injury (ABI) during infancy when she had febrile seizures from high fever. The tell-tale sign of that old injury was seen in the prefrontal cortex. Much of it had become granular, causing learning disabilities in elementary and high school.

Leah spent the next weeks over Christmas on a separate ward while I was in an induced coma for almost 2 months allowing injuries to heal as well as a heart bypass, surgery to my broken neck and 3 limbs which had been reinforced with metal rods and screws. Finally in early July, I was released from a nursing home and able to join Leah in a newly rented apartment near the hospital. With her own pain from a broken femur, she lugged my wheelchair up and down the steps to take me for walks in the area. I finally convinced her to return to her surgeon to look at the break over a year later. The rod that had been inserted so long ago kept the broken bone aligned but the unhealed break just swivelled around that rod. It was finally wrapped and fixed permanently.

Although I had more physical injury, Leah had the emotional trauma of being fully awake and conscious of the impact and excruciating pain, the chaos on the highway, the ensuing emergency transfer to Royal University Hospital and of her mom being kept in coma in ICU. As a divorced mother, I still consider the very worst part of this accident to be Leah's second brain injury and emotional trauma to both of my children. Their beloved grandfather passed away suddenly while we were in hospital. Her younger sister Lynn visited weekends from our home 3 hours away but thankfully a kind family supported and encouraged her to stay in the village to finish high school. That community is tight and everyone had parts in helping us through.

In the 2 decades since that accident, brain injury has been prevalent for Leah and I and we three have moved back to Ontario. Lynn was traumatized by anxiety and helplessness while having to fend for herself. Leah still has flare ups of PTSD from all that she has experienced since that day but we are thankful for our magnificent health care and support services available to all Canadians. She received therapy for debilitating fear of being in a moving vehicle and of hospital waiting rooms. The waiting room was representative of her grief and survivor guilt.

We have both changed considerably. Personality change is to be expected but that doesn't necessarily have to be for the worse, just different. Although Leah was a bright student she had difficulties focusing and suffered depression all through her grade school years due to her first brain injury. ABI in childhood causes learning issues but the brain has a remarkable way of creating new learning pathways which Leah was able to utilize well. When the traumatic brain injury came along 17 years later in our car accident there were far more challenges for her but with persistence and support was able to complete a Social Science degree with Distinction at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Waterloo. She has a beautifully raised son and a career. She still struggles with poor memory, time management and organization.

I had previously worked full time at McMaster University and for Saskatchewan Social Services. I was an oil portrait artist in my spare time. I hiked daily along both the Niagara Gorge and in the Saskatchewan countryside for 15 years in my old life and now am unemployable and have to rely on a hiking walker. I can no longer climb hills or hike uneven trails but I can still walk along level, maintained hiking paths in the lovely community of Stratford. I live independently in my own home with the support of my daughters and two support workers.

18 months before this accident, a coworker approached me about illustrating a narrative he had written. I was thrilled to work on his vividly written story starting in the spring of 2002 and I completed 3 or 4 of the illustrations before things came to a sudden halt with the ABI. I had to relearn to paint as well as activities of daily living as basic as walking and talking. A few years later I had regained enough of my oil painting skills to show solo at the Gallery on the Bridges in Saskatoon. It has been a labour of love but 19 years later I am almost finished those 12 book illustrations and we hope to produce a picture book in the coming months. Never give up – even if it takes 19 years!

The most important thing I want to impart to my fellow ABI survivors and their caretakers is to really reach for those stars, even with the extra challenges. It is always worth it. Don't expect life as usual as it will be much different. Find and be involved in a good support group for fellow survivors and caregivers. Personality changes can cause the loss of old friends or even family but know that there are so many more of us out there in their place. We certainly DO understand the complexities of a broken brain that many from our previous lives cannot. And that is okay. Sometimes it just takes the experience of surviving an ABI or being a loved one of a survivor to invest in the learning in order to come to that understanding.

Unfortunately, the high rate of ABI will continue day after day through disease, auto or bicycle accidents and a gazillion other causes but listening and learning will increase prevention and allow all of us to live our best lives in spite of it all. Never be afraid to ask for help. It's out there and in Canada it's financially doable. Blessings to all of you beautiful people!