



Michelle Bloodworth

A daughters story
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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

My dad; my dad has always been strong both physically and mentally. Dad served many years in the US military and completed a tour in Vietnam. Dad loved riding motorcycles and did many trips across the country with his friends. Dad was married to my mom for 20+ years and was the guy you called upon to help install your new toilet and fix your plumbing, or install your pool, or build a garage, he could fix or build anything....a real "Mr. fix it" they would say. Dad was an avid fisherman and enjoyed camping which we did a lot as a family when we were small. One of dad's greatest joys was being a grandpa....this all changed on the night of January 24th, 1996.

I had just put the kids to bed and was settling down to watch TV and enjoy the quiet...when the phone rang and it was mom. "Dad's had a fall and bumped his head while roller skating. The roller rink sent him by ambulance to the hospital for examination as a precaution and I will call you back when I know more." This was odd and my spider senses were tingling because my dad would never just go to the hospital as a precaution....either you were ok or you weren't; he said this so many times. I picked up the phone and called my friend to come sit with the kids and headed up to the hospital.

Upon arrival to St. Joseph's Hospital Emergency Area, I must have looked panicked stricken as my husband and I were escorted to a private room and two police officers a nurse and doctor all came in to the room. I knew immediately something bad had happened as this was not normal. But absolutely nothing could have prepared for what they told us. Dad had had a massive heart attack and was without oxygen to his brain for over eleven minutes and they were still working on him. They also advised us that we needed to prepare for the worst. What did that even mean?? At this point I felt light headed and weak, and could only see their mouths moving but couldn't hear or even process anything they were trying to explain. This was not real or happening, dad was so healthy this can't be true. I am going to wake up from this nightmare....but it was not a dream.

For the next 72 hours my family and I spent every hour by his bedside watching him fight for his life. I remember there being so many wires and tubes, the beep, beep sounds of the life support system working to breathe for him. The doctors came to tell us after 48 hours that dad had suffered a massive heart attack and had severe heart damage that would require surgery to repair, but worse than that dad had an ABI (Acquired Brain Injury) caused by a lack of oxygen to his brain. (I didn't even know what ABI meant at that time) They continued to say that dad would likely be a vegetable and not likely to be able to do anything for himself and require 24 hour support that's if he survived and we should prepare and discuss as a family next steps. When I asked what that meant, they simply stated "remove him from life support, and plan a funeral." I felt like I had been punched in the gut and immediately began crying....but I knew my dad was a fighter and was going to survive. He had to...

The next 3 months dad spent in St. Joseph Hospital in the cardiac care unit. He had heart surgery to repair his aorta and then when stable enough he was transferred to Parkwood Hospital where he entered the Brain Rehabilitation Unit where he/we would spend the next 15 months. At the time of dad's admission to Parkwood dad thought I was 12; my sister 10 and my brother 7. He had lost 15 years of his short term memory. Dad couldn't remember he had 4 grandchildren or even recognize their faces when shown a photo. Dad slowly learned how to speak, read, days of the week, months of the year; then the tough part....walking, dressing and shaving and all the activities of daily living that that we all take for granted. At this point we didn't know if dad would ever be able to care for himself again let alone live alone. We took shifts working with dad every day at his rehab, going for walks, doing exercise, working on reading, hand eye coordination, eating with fork and knife and then we would spend some time talking and looking through photo albums trying to spark some memories.

At about 9 months into dad's rehabilitation I would get excited when dad would remember names and dates and he was up and walking now. But the doctors and nurses always reminded us not to get our hopes up and this might be as good as it gets....they suggested we start touring LTC Homes. When I got up the courage to do it we arrived at the first LTC I didn't get three steps in the front door and I started crying and said to my uncle, "My dad is not living here". I turned and left. I was not able to accept this was his fate; not now, not yet, maybe not ever. I remember the smell....It made me sick. I remember thinking; if this is as good as it gets then he will stay with me. Within a few weeks of this Dad starting remembering things like names and faces being able to read and walk alone unassisted, showering alone and becoming really stable on his feet. This was so encouraging. It seemed every day was a small milestone... life was going to be different but dad was a fighter and was learning new skills, and coping strategies every day...as were we! We needed to remember NOT to say "remember dad" or "come on dad" Remembering that everything took extra time but it was important to give dad the time to do things for himself in his own time....I kept thinking could he really be ok?

Fast forward 5 years; Dad was living independently in his own apartment. He may not have known how to use certain tools anymore, and couldn't install a pool or fix plumbing, or riding his motorcycle across the country but my dad was/is enjoying life. Together we had to learn how to enjoy new hobbies and spend time together without getting frustrated if things took extra time. Those adjustments have included doing small tasks in their entirety or doing things in a quiet space with little distractions. Some of dad's new hobbies are walking, gardening, baking, (he makes a mean zucchini cake) reading, and golfing with his grandson...oh! And he still loves fishing...that hasn't changed at all.

Today it has been 25 years since his ABI and things are great, dad has even traveled extensively in Europe on his own. Dad worked hard on improving his social skills, being able to be in crowds and learn how to exercise patience practicing the skills taught to him on how to remember important details.

Lastly; my dad taught me the value of enjoying today because you might not have tomorrow; to exercise and practice patience.

Dad's famous saying...."don't sweat the small stuff". This has a much deeper meaning now. I try to exercise this each and every day.

My dad is my hero and my children are lucky to have him as their grandpa!

Sincerely: A very proud daughter...Michelle Bloodworth!