



TBI News & Views

A publication of the Northern New Jersey Traumatic Brain Injury System

MIKE GREENWALD, THE MAN BEHIND “MIKE-AT-THE-MIC”

Facilitated discussions: Allowing people with brain injury to be heard.

By Olesya Iosipchuk, Research Assistant, Center for Neuropsychology and Neuroscience Research

People’s lives are often governed by their passions. Michael Greenwald is not an exception. Working as a science teacher for many years, Mike found comfort in guiding and supporting his students of various ages. During his classes, he always tried to give students extra guidance and inspire them to dig deeper and explore topics of their interest.

Mike’s passion for teaching never went away, even after sustaining a traumatic brain injury (TBI). In 1992, Mike joined his good friend, Miriam Goldman, the first person with brain injury to serve on the Board of Trustees for the Brain Injury Alliance of New Jersey, on VOICES (previously known as the Council for the Head Injury Community). Members of the council organize various seminars and social events to educate and advocate for the rights of people with brain injuries. Not long after this, inspired by the famous show, “The Phil Donahue Show,” Mike started “Mike-at-the-Mic.” The series of interactive panel discussions quickly became an important part of the Brain Injury Alliance as it allowed people with brain injuries to vocalize their opinions and connect with others with similar experiences.

As the facilitator of the discussions, Mike felt like he was back in his

classroom in front of his students. He was excited to learn new information from the panel members and share this knowledge with the audience while infusing it with his humor. To prepare for each session, Mike asks people involved in the group to come up with their most burning questions, and after careful consideration, he selects a few. The topics range from relationships to insurance, specifically anything people with brain injury would want to discuss. But the next question is, who should the panel members be? “It would have to be someone knowledgeable about the topic. And someone who was a good person to talk to in public, it is not that easy to speak in public,” says Mike. The series attracts people from different backgrounds, and anyone who is interested in learning more about brain injury is welcome. Each episode addresses several topics, featuring expert panelists in their respective subject matters.

In 2019, the series started taking place over Zoom. However, that did not interfere with Mike’s plan. “Mike-at-the-Mic” gained even more popularity as the virtual platform allowed people across the country to join the conversation. Additionally, people who didn’t feel comfortable speaking in front of a huge audience could share their opinions from the comfort of



their homes. To this day, “Mike-at-the-Mic” continues to own a powerful platform that gives voice to individuals who live with brain injury.

Mike’s passion for education allows the voices of people with brain injury to be heard. Scan the QR code below to view the most recent “Mike-at-the-Mic” session entitled, “Transition to the World After Brain Injury.”

For information on upcoming “Mike-at-the-Mic” sessions or to register, email Tom Grady at tgrady@bianj.org and include “Join VOICES” in the subject line. ■



VOICES ADVANCING THE BRAIN INJURY COMMUNITY

Members rediscover how they can advocate for positive change and communicate their views.

By Stephanie Spivak, Research Assistant, Center for Traumatic Brain Injury Research



Voices Advancing the Brain Injury Community (VOICES) is one of two advocacy committees at the Brain Injury Alliance of New Jersey (BIANJ) dedicated to the needs, rights, and lives of people with brain injury. VOICES seeks to better the lives of people with brain injury and those close to them by providing a space for empowerment and social bonding. The group's 300 (approximate) members meet monthly for discussions, events, and advocacy work. Members and their legislative advocacy network receive a monthly newsletter outlining current issues and events within the organization.

Navigating the world after brain injury can be isolating and daunting. As such, VOICES' mission is to "champion and publicize the advocacy, rights, and needs of people who have survived a brain injury," as described by their Director of Advocacy and Public Affairs Tom Grady. Brain injury is fundamentally life-changing as it creates novel barriers and challenges, with physical and mental recovery representing the tip of the iceberg. VOICES seeks to address issues affecting this community, from finances, healthcare, and public policy to the presentation and treatment of brain injury in the emergency room. Through an advocacy perspective, the group focuses on the needs of the community overall rather than individualized support; however, members may receive helpful resources.

Effecting change for the issues individuals with brain injury face often relies on public policy. An essential part of VOICES is building relationships with lawmakers to help implement

this kind of change. Members have also had opportunities to involve themselves in legislative change by speaking at hearings concerning bills.

Currently, VOICES is working on recategorizing brain injuries as chronic conditions, shifting the focus from primarily short-term care. This shift could create resources for the future if an individual's mental or physical condition declines as a result of brain injury, such as cardiovascular disease from being unable to walk. VOICES is collaborating with professionals advocating for similar changes like John Corrigan, PhD, ABPP, at The Ohio State University College of Medicine.

With VOICES, members are part of a community where they can express their concerns and ideas, gain a unique perspective through other individuals with lived TBI experience, become involved with legislature, stay informed about brain injury-related events, and gain access to beneficial resources.

Individuals with brain injuries, their loved ones, and others concerned with improving the lives of people with brain injuries are encouraged to get involved. If interested, contact Tom Grady, Director of Advocacy and Public Affairs, at tgrady@bianj.org or 732-745-0200. ■



"[Members] express their own unique needs, taking responsibility toward fulfilling the mission of VOICES and serving the broader brain injury community through a mutually-supportive, win-win environment where they may grow, gain a sense of self-worth, and develop a network of friendship."

- Tom Grady

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY MAKES A DIFFERENCE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH BRAIN INJURY

Modifications foster individuals' independence and safety within their daily roles and routines.

By Emily DeBel, MS, OTR/L, ATP, Program Coordinator, Occupational Therapy Fellowship Program in Physical Rehabilitation, Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation—West Orange (a Select Medical hospital)

In today's world, there is a wide range of "smart" devices such as phones, watches, TVs, and home appliances. These devices offer an abundance of opportunities for individuals with disabilities, and many have integrated smart devices into their daily routines. Given the prevalence and continuous advancements in technology, occupational therapists have recognized the potential to use "assistive technology" to benefit individuals with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and other disabilities.

Assistive technology refers to the use of readily available tech devices and equipment that can support individuals with disabilities, helping them increase their independence and safety in daily activities. It is especially valuable for individuals who have experienced traumatic brain injury. For example, power wheelchairs can be adapted to be controlled with one's gaze or nod of the head, allowing people with limited mobility to move more freely. Individuals with long-term aphasia can use communication devices controlled by switches, head movements, or eye gaze. Adaptive switches can be programmed to help individuals use cell phones to communicate with loved ones.



Many companies that sell commercial products have developed adapted versions of their offerings. For instance, L'Oréal created a stabilizing device to apply lip gloss, enabling individuals with limited hand mobility to apply makeup on their own. Pottery Barn introduced a line of accessible home décor and furniture, making it easier for wheelchair users to navigate their homes. Gaming companies have adapted gaming devices, allowing individuals with different needs to participate in leisure activities once again. Apple has even developed a smart hearing aid for people with impaired arm mobility, enabling them to independently manage their hearing aids.

Assistive technology opens a world of possibilities for individuals with disabilities. As Christopher Reeve once said, "So many of our dreams at first seem impossible, then they seem improbable, and then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable." With the help of assistive technology, clinicians can assist individuals with brain injuries to participate fully in all aspects of life.



Emily DeBel, MS, OTR/L, ATP, currently serves as the Program Coordinator in the Occupational Therapy Fellowship Program in Physical Rehabilitation at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation—West Orange (a Select Medical hospital). She is a graduate of Seton Hall University and a board-certified assistive technology professional with five years of practice in neurological rehabilitation.

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TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY FACT SHEETS

The Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center summarizes cognitive problems that can occur after TBI in its fact sheets, which can be found by scanning the QR code on the right.



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