

The hidden disability: Traumatic Brain Injury

Local Brain Energy Support Team offers support, resources, hope

BY KIM THOMPSON

Penny Condoll doesn't remember the car accident that changed her life about a decade ago.

She does remember what life became like for her after the accident, however. Waking up in the hospital one month later, Condoll spent one year in intensive rehabilitation treatment. Post-rehabilitation, she had to embark on a journey of major life changes and adjustments; it would be a profoundly different world for her going forward.

And even a decade later, she's still navigating through a changed life.

For Condoll and others like her, surviving a brain injury and then having to carry on a life afterward is not an easy journey. The injury impacts survivors and their families forever. It's one that can be fraught with stress, anger, frustration, worry and despair. Survivors may face a great number of obstacles, such as dramatic personality changes; job loss; social isolation; dementia issues; inability to focus; emotional instability; strained and broken relationships; and a potential host of other physical, mental and emotional challenges.

For veterans and active-duty Servicemembers who have traumatic brain injury (TBI), it can be even harder. In addition to the aforementioned challenges, they also have to transition from military to civilian life, which can be difficult enough on its own.

Condoll struggled to find resources and support systems. Ironically, prior to her accident, she served as a medical social worker and ran various programs for area hospitals. She had access to peers, doctors, specialists, and other professionals in the medical arena; yet, even with that insider view, she found that help for her and others in the same situation was greatly lacking.

In 2008, it was time to do something about it.

So, along with others, Condoll formed the Brain Energy Support Team (BEST), an organization devoted to four key principles: acknowledgment, good and honest communication, control and recovery. It looks like this: acknowledgment that there aren't enough resources and support in today's climate; that survivors do better with more control over their own treatment and their lives; and that recovery can be hopeful and fruitful, despite the circumstances. Most importantly, some team members are personally affected by traumatic brain injury and have a unique perspective on knowing what is best (hence, the very appropriate organizational acronym).

What started as a small grassroots organization has blossomed into a nationally recognized organization for training, support groups, peer mentoring and public awareness. Today, the organization is helping about 6,000 people statewide.

It won't stop just there. There is more to do and the team is ready.

"Our world today expects all of us to function and perform," said BEST Interim Executive Director Gloria Kraegel. "For someone with a brain injury, our social systems are designed not to succeed, but to fail."

Expert studies share some sobering statistics that acknowledge that statement. One study took a look at a large homeless population, and about 90 percent of study participants were shown to have traumatic brain injuries. Another study examined a sample of incarcerated adults, in which 80 percent of the participants turned out to have brain injury.



Courtesy photo

"The consequences of not doing this right are a serious social epidemic," Kraegel warned. "Survivors and caregivers need that safety net and a place to turn for help."

For veterans and active-duty military members, traumatic brain injuries can serve a tough blow.

"There is a stigma attached with brain injuries, especially amongst veterans," Kraegel said. "I have personally heard vets share many 'walk of shame' stories and feeling disconnected with their comrades for something that is not their fault."

Both Condoll and Kraegel have personal connections to the military — they are both veterans themselves. Condoll served in the Army and Kraegel served in the Air Force.

"At BEST, there is an ability for us to work with (veterans) in a safe environment to give them support. We honor them," Kraegel said.

"When brains are broken, there is no cognitive orthotic," Condoll added. "With BEST, empowerment coaches and peer mentors help survivors regain a sense of independence and help them learn about devices, tools and strategies to navigate forward. It's a non-medical approach that creates that safety net and support. We also have opportunities for

caregivers to connect with other caregivers to provide support as well."

The BEST team has some exciting things on the horizon to continue to help survivors and their families. Currently, a crafting group called "Stitchin' It Up" meets every Wednesday to create crafts, learn new things, and be there to support each other. The group's current projects are making special brain injury survival bracelets and special kits with essential items and information housed inside for hospitals to give to patients with brain injuries.

In addition to the "Stitchin' It Up" group, BEST continues to build its online presence and boasts a vast library of reference materials, links, resources and videos. The organization continues to provide training to mentors, educators, and the medical community.

BEST has forged some valuable partnerships with other organizations to help best serve survivors.

Condoll herself continues to have speaking engagements around the state to further the cause and provide awareness to various entities and takes part in advisory councils at the state capitol.

For those who need help or have a loved one that needs help, both Condoll and Kraegel recommend taking a look at the website (www.brainenergysupportteam.org/) first.

"We welcome anyone to check out our website and have a look around," Condoll said. "This will give you a feel of who we are and what we have to offer."

BEST also has a Facebook page at www.facebook.com/pages/Brain-Energy-Support-Team/165908016753065.

The BEST team also welcomes volunteers and donations. On the organization's current wish list is locating facility space for administration purposes, trainings, special events and activities that provides both accessibility and parking. Due to upcoming budget cuts in county bus transportation, the program is also seeking transportation alternatives to help participants attend various BEST opportunities. Visit these links for information about how to contact the organization or donate: www.brainenergysupportteam.org/home-page/contact-us/ and www.brainenergysupportteam.org/help-best-grow/help-best-grow/.