



Capturing Life through an Optimistic Lens

By Carol Paetkau, ED, Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association



Dave Hildebrand

As I recently sorted through some of the beautiful photographs produced by the members of the Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association (FVBIA) PhotoClub in Abbotsford, British Columbia, I was struck by one in particular; the image of an exuberant looking tiger that seemed like he was sticking his tongue out at the world. I had lots of amazing pictures from the group's excursion to the local zoo to choose from for FVBIA's newsletter but I kept coming back to this one in particular. I couldn't resist finding out more about the man who was able to record the joyful spirit of this brief moment in time with his lens.

In doing so, I discovered that most of the images captured by Dave Hildebrand's camera seem to reflect this talented man's optimistic viewpoint in spite of dealing with incredible adversity after suffering devastating brain and spinal cord injuries in 2009.

Before his injury, Dave was an active man working in construction installing deck railings, overhead doors, gutters, soffit, and siding. Dave occasionally played pick-up hockey, skied and hiked as well as being involved in church with men's ministry. His two sons were attending University and Dave was living on his own after separating from his wife four months prior to the event that would change their lives.

On February 24, 2009, Dave was at work making up and installing deck railing. After lunch he was on a second story deck measuring for cutting railings to size when he inexplicably fell, landing on his head. Dave suffered numerous facial bone fractures, skull fractures, bleeding in the lining of his brain, a traumatic brain injury, vertebrae fractures, rib fracture, neck fractures, lacerations on his forehead, and other injuries. "They almost lost me" was Dave's response to how the injury impacted on his family. "Dad was no longer able to work." He remained in Royal Columbian Hospital for two weeks where he had a plate surgically installed in his neck (-C5 - C6 -C7).

Dave describes life as being "difficult the first two years, especially the first few months". Nobody told me what to expect from my brain injury" which was only one of the many challenges he faced. Fortunately his girlfriend was able to stay with him for the first month until he was able to manage with homecare support



provided through WorksafeBC twice a week to clean his suite and take him for shopping as needed as he was unable to drive until June of that year.

Being able to drive didn't mean that the effects of the acquired brain injury he sustained in the fall were gone. He had balance issues for about two years. Back seats of moving vehicles can still be an issue as being jostled too much makes him feel ill and very tired. Noise and lights bothered him a lot for the first three years, and noise still does to a certain degree. Dave says "I do not handle stress very well. It tires me out and overwhelms me very easily. He recognizes that he has much less energy and needs a nap every day in order to deal with the challenges caused by an acquired brain injury. "I have to be very careful to pace myself and not overdo things...I get frustrated with my lack of energy, especially when I see people who need help, and I can't help them like I'd like to."

In spite of his difficult journey, Dave is still able to view his world through an optimistic lens. When asked "What have been the things that have made your recovery positive" Dave listed off a number of experiences including "learning about brain injury, discovering new talents and abilities, receiving counselling, meeting many new and wonderful friends, Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association and being treated well by WorksafeBC".

"I would probably be very depressed and lonely if not for the Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association. I have made many new friends, attended conferences on brain injury, have had opportunity to participate in programs made possible by funding from various sources, and found a place of acceptance and appreciation."

Dave actively participates in many of Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association's groups and programs. Through the Pay it Forward: Health and Wellness for ABI program, Dave has been involved with cooking classes, a weekly walking group, photography and art groups where he's "discovered [he has] an eye for photography" and that he can paint. He also regularly joins in at the Recipe Exchange Group, Spa day when it's offered as well as Coffee and Chat groups.

Dave was not able to return to his previous career and has not worked since his injury. He was sent for work retraining which was unsuccessful so he was pensioned by WorksafeBC. His income is less than his pre-injury employment which is a significant adjustment for survivors and families after someone is injured. The pressure of trying to return to work can be overwhelming for many people with acquired brain injuries who struggle just to get through their day.

"Life is easier now that I have been retired by Worksafe. I regularly get out for photography and FVBIA programs when they are available. My relationship with my girlfriend has remained intact, I regularly attend the weekly drop-in, go for coffee with friends, and see my sons regularly. However, I often struggle with feeling less than whole and not being a productive member of society like I used to be", a comment made by many people recovering from an acquired brain injury.

Productivity certainly takes on a new meaning for people after brain injury. Dave is still very productive in different ways than he was pre-injury but his contributions to society are just as valuable.



Mary McKee, FVBIA Case Manager comments that “Dave is always willing to help out. He is an excellent role model and has phenomenal empathy for people going through the learning process after brain injury. Dave’s willingness to share his experiences and knowledge to support others in a gentle yet firm manner is invaluable. He is able to put things into perspective for them in a way that people who have never experienced brain injury just can’t.”

Dave’s name has been put forward by the board of Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association for election to the board at the Association’s Annual General Meeting. He has a new opportunity to help people with acquired brain injuries by being their voice at FVBIA board meetings. He also mentored children in nature photography at FVBIA’s Young at Arts Summer Camp at the Blue Heron Reserve and has been asked to do the same thing with the Blue Heron’s other children’s camps in the future.

“I have a new role to fill, that of being a help and encouragement to others with a brain injury, as much as my energy will allow anyway.”

While Dave’s life after his injury has not gone back to the way it was, he is hopeful for the future and realizes that there are many exciting aspects of his new life. “I manage quite well on my own though and have discovered that I can go on extended road trips, so that is definitely a part of my future plans. It gives me something to look forward to in life.” The rest of us are looking forward to the beautiful photos that Dave is bound to produce through his optimistic lens during his travels.

For others who are going through similar experiences, Dave shares some words of encouragement. “Just remember, we are not victims, we are survivors. We will learn as much as we can about our injury, put the past behind us and discover our new life to live it to the fullest possible. If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”

“...and you don't need to change my name [in this article]. I'm proud of what I have survived and how far I've come.”

Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association is a Community Partner of the United Way of the Fraser Valley and receives funding from Fraser Health Acquired Brain Injury Program, ICBC and the Province of British Columbia.



“Tiger Raspberry” and “Flamingos” courtesy of Dave Hildebrand, 2013