



**Brain Injury
Alliance**
ARIZONA

Cyndy Feasel, Author of After the Cheering Stops, on CTE and Becoming a Warrior

Cyndy, a widow of former NFL player Grant Feasel, recently spoke with The Noggin's Editor, Brittany Sweeney, about finding hope in the aftermath of her husband's CTE and her experience speaking at the BIAAZ's Rays of Hope Conference and authors' panel.

The first words Cyndy said to me were apologetic in nature: "I'm so sorry!" She was about five minutes late for our scheduled phone interview, hardly discourteous. "The article on the study of CTE's effects on NFL players from Boston University just came out today, and I've been receiving a lot of calls and Facebook messages, even from complete strangers!" she explains. "It's been a busy day. The article's publication was news to me. Cyndy went on to share how the study shows that 99% of the NFL players whose brains were posthumously examined had been diagnosed with CTE, or Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease. "I felt so liberated by that [study]" she admits.

Due to her role as a self-described warrior battling for acknowledgment of CTE on a larger scale, her enthusiasm for evidence showing the harms caused by the sports-related degenerative disease makes sense. But Cyndy fills many other roles too: she's a former NFL wife, a mother, an art teacher, and as of a couple of years ago, a published author. Still, overall, she seems to find herself step-



Cyndy poses with her book *After the Cheering Stops*, which she wrote to educate and warn others about CTE, the brain injury that devastated her family.

ping more and more into the role of advocate, especially for the student athletes whom she teaches and whom she sees directly affected



Above left: Forever #54, Grant Feasel's brawn was matched only by his brains. He turned down several scholarships for dental school to play in the NFL. Above right: Cyndy and Grant celebrated their wedding bliss with smiles and a bit of cake.

by the bumps and jolts they receive while on the playing field. "I'm passionate about keeping kids from having brain injuries," she says.

Her dedication to brain injury prevention becomes even more understandable when taken in context of her and her family's own experiences living with and loving someone who suffered from CTE's devastating effects. After all, when Cyndy first met her future husband, Grant Feasel, at Abilene Christian College, she couldn't have imagined that the "soft-spoken... California kid" with whom she formed an instant connection on their blind date would one day face insurmountable challenges brought on by CTE. She was too busy admiring his drive, intellect, and how he simply seemed different from other guys she knew. She still refers to him as a "Renaissance Man" because he appreciated everything from poetry to music, and of course, sports. "He was the whole package," she recalls. She also didn't realize at the time that Grant, who had played football since he was eight, already had a brain injury by the time they met.

After college, Grant would play in the NFL for eight years, from 1983-1992. Six of those years were spent playing center for the Seattle Seahawks. For Cyndy, those years were largely responsible for his untimely death on July 15, 2012 at the age of 52. As Grant told Cyndy shortly before he passed away, "if I'd only known what I loved the most would end up killing me and taking away everything I loved, I never would have done it."

Cyndy couldn't agree more with that sentiment. After watching her husband descend into an abyss of alcoholism and medication abuse as he tried to dull the pain of constant headaches, the agitation from memory loss, and depression, she says it became her destiny to become a CTE warrior. "It takes a strong person to stand up for things that aren't popular and confront adversity," she shares. Considering how popular sports are, football in particular, speaking out against CTE certainly isn't for the faint-of-heart. "We know a lot more than when our parents played," she reminds, "and when you know better, you do better." Sometimes, she wishes there was a reality



show about the different families affected by Monday Night Football so people could really see what the aftermath of CTE is really like. But since such a show is unlikely to air anytime soon, Cyndy is focused on the next best thing- sharing her and Grant's story with the world, one conference, appearance, and interview at a time.

Fortunately, she was able to carve time out of her busy schedule to speak at the Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona's (BIAAZ) 2017 Annual Rays of Hope Conference for survivors of brain injury and their families on Friday, May 12. Her main message to those in attendance focused on patience and self-care. She suggested that survivors and their caregivers find as many resources as possible, to become educated, and to search out appropriate professionals who understand brain injury, such as therapists. She also recommended finding understanding and emotional support from people who are in similar situations, like at a support group. Above all, she let caretakers know that it's also crucial they take care of themselves. "In order to be good for anyone else, you gotta take care of you," she advised the audience.

Cyndy also presented at the BIAAZ authors' panel the day following the conference. She shared excerpts from her book *After the Cheering Stops*, which chronicles the Feasel family's struggles to cope with Grant's CTE. Overall, she says she loved being on the panel and was thrilled to be able to meet the other authors who presented, such as Amy and Chris Hotaling and Jeff Sebell. Since the panel, they have all connected on social media. "It became a court of survival. Even though we wrote about topics that were different, they were all related in some way through brain injury," she says. "I felt empowered being on a panel like that; I love that these people get it." She also loved the questions asked by participants, and felt that the entire experience helped with her healing process.

As it turns out, Cyndy likes to end all interviews in the same way. Ours was no exception. "Please educate yourself about this par-



In 2017, Cyndy traveled the country, from Washington D.C to Arizona, spreading awareness about CTE. One of her stops included a speaking engagement at the BIAAZ's own annual Rays of Hope Conference!

ticular brain injury... I just continually say look at the evidence and read the latest materials and studies," is her plea. Since brain injuries don't discriminate, she feels people shouldn't be naïve and think this couldn't happen to them or someone they love. Her main goal moving forward is to be a constant presence on social media newsfeeds in order to continue spreading awareness for brain injury, and especially CTE. She also wants to encourage those who might be affected by CTE to consider donating their brains in order for neuroscientists to better study the disease's timeline. Essentially, she's doing what you would expect a CTE warrior to do. Fight on Cyndy, fight on.

Brittany Sweeney is a former middle school special education teacher and is currently a resource facilitation specialist at the BIAAZ. She can be reached at resources@biaaz.org for questions regarding brain injury resources and information.

