



**Brain Injury
Alliance**
ARIZONA

Bob and Shelly Millsap's Kitchen Mishap and the TBI that Brought Them Closer Together

The five-year anniversary of my wife Shelly's traumatic brain injury (TBI) passed earlier this year. Her life and the lives of our family members were forever changed in January 2013 when a seemingly harmless homemade bottle of ginger ale was taken out of the refrigerator and placed in

the kitchen sink to be disposed of. Shelly was busy and didn't pour the beverage out right away. As the bottle sat out for a few days, it went from cold to warm, and slowly fermented, becoming a literal ticking time bomb, which happened to detonate at the exact instant Shelly walked past it in the kitchen. The force of the blast through



Shelly and Bob enjoy spending quality time together.

the tiny opening of the two-liter bottle knocked her out completely. When she regained consciousness about 20 minutes later, she was bloody, her face was swollen, and there was ginger ale splattered all over the kitchen.

In a daze, she called me immediately. I was at work at a

natural food store I ran in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. At first, I couldn't understand what she was telling me, but when she texted me a picture of herself, I was horrified at the sight of her swollen, bloody, black-and-blue face. At the time, we lived in the remote town of Victor, Idaho. I called our neighbors to see if anyone was available to

take her to the doctor, but everyone I talked to had already made the commute to Jackson Hole for the day. I look back now and realize how foolish I was in not calling an ambulance, but I must have been in a daze too. Somehow, Shelly was able to get herself to the car, which was covered in ice, as it was about zero degrees outside. After scrapping the windshield and running the defroster for a few minutes, she was able to see enough out of a tiny corner of the windshield to drive the mile to the town's lone health clinic.

The nurse and doctor who saw Shelly were, like me, appalled at the sight of her face. At first, they suspected she had been a victim of domestic violence. Shelly was able to explain her accident to them, after which the doctor hastily called me. I was in the middle of crossing the mountainous Teton Pass on the thirty-minute drive home to Idaho. The doctor was extremely concerned that Shelly's nose and eye socket might be broken. She told me the nurse would be driving her to the small hospital in the town of Driggs, which was 10 miles north of Victor. I navigated the ice-packed roads to meet Shelly there. She had a CT scan done, and thankfully, the results came back quickly. The hospital doctor explained that her nose was broken, but her eye socket was fine. She told us how fortunate Shelly was that this was the extent of her injuries.

We went home feeling very confused as to how this kind of accident could have happened, but also lucky that she seemed okay. When we arrived home, we were greeted by the sight of the remnants of the ginger ale explosion. I also saw the two-liter soda bottle lying on the ground, somehow still intact. The bottle cap was in the dining room. I cleaned up while Shelly rested, and we counted our blessings.

Shelly returned to work the very next day, shrugging off her injuries. She had recently started a baking business that had really taken off, so much so that she had needed to rent space at a nearby commercial kitchen to keep up with all the orders. As the days passed, her nose and face still hurt, but she was healing steadily, and life seemed to be getting back to normal.

About 15 days after the accident, Shelly called me at work to ask me to bring food home for dinner. At some point while she was talking, words were no longer coming out. Panic-stricken, I quickly left work and drove home. I called the doctor and told her what had just happened, and she told me we needed to see a neurologist right away. There was only one neurologist who visited our remote valley twice a month, but the doctor explained that he would be in the area the following day. When I arrived home, I was greeted by Shelly, who was sitting in the living room. She struggled to talk and barely could walk. I was numb with shock.

We scheduled an appointment with the neurologist for the next day, and he told me that Shelly was much like a soldier who had been hit by a bomb in wartime. She had what was called a traumatic brain injury and she would not be getting better. This would be our "new normal" and we would have to learn to adjust to it. He said this all in such a matter-of-fact way; he certainly seemed to lack anything resembling bedside manner! At one point, he asked Shelly why she talked in such an "infantile" way.

From that day forward, the true journey began. I felt we needed to find a specialist who would be more sensitive to Shelly's needs than our local neurologist had been. Walking and talking had become so difficult for Shelly that she was having to relearn these skills all over



again. Parts of both her short and long-term memory were gone. I was working for an uncompassionate boss who did not understand it when I cut my work week from 70+ hours down to 55 or so. We had moved to the Tetons from Arizona less than two years earlier, so Shelly had not made close friends yet, and we had no nearby family. Essentially, we were isolated, alone, and facing bigger hurdles than anyone could have imagined. We were fortunate that our two amazing children, Dylan (17) and Taylor (12), stepped up and helped however they could, which meant the world to us.

The closest large city to us was Salt Lake City, Utah, about five hours away. I made an appointment for Shelly at the University of Utah's Neurology Department. She was furious with me and did not want to go, not realizing how severe her situation was, or how desperately she needed help. I had since learned we were extremely fortunate that Shelly did not lose her life that January day.

As for me, I was falling apart. I would cry uncontrollably as I drove to and from work. By this point in my life, I was not a stranger to tragedy— My fiancée had been killed over 20 years earlier and now I was driving down the road crying and wondering, "why me again?" and "why Shelly?" But whenever I walked into work or came home to Shelly, I tried to appear to have it all together.

I had never really considered Shelly to be patient person before, but I was amazed at how patient she had become with herself and her new situation. Even though I was feeling sorry for her and for myself, she would have none of that. She started working every day toward self-improvement. Baby steps were being made.

One of the many personal lessons we



Shelly and Bob as Newlyweds.

learned about TBI was the definition of "invisible injury." Shelly's face had healed up nicely, so she looked great! People don't always understand how severely injured a survivor of brain injury can be when they look fine on the outside. Friends and family started to assume she must be ok based on her appearance, which was hard, because, despite appearances, we needed so much help.

Fairly quickly, we discovered that, in our case, western medicine did not have all the answers for Shelly's brain injury. The answer to every problem seemed to be medication, so we found ourselves moving away from western medicine more and more. There were a couple of local alternative medical providers we started seeing who did wonders for Shelly. One provider worked on manipulating her central nervous system in a way that helped rewire her brain cells. The other did amazing work with acupuncture and acupressure. We traveled back to Arizona to learn about neuro-feedback treatments



that we could do from home.

Together, Shelly and I marveled at her constant achievements of small milestones, such as driving to the corner to pick up Taylor at the bus stop, cooking a simple meal, or walking to the mailbox down the street. Shelly worked so hard and was so aware of each improvement she made. The milestones she accomplished gradually grew in scale. Because of these experiences, we also grew closer as a family, since Dylan, Taylor, and I were the only people who truly knew what a courageous battle Shelly was fighting.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the biggest repercussion of her injury, and her symptoms are still severe. Her brain remains in constant panic mode. Noises, commotion, and sudden changes all wreak complete havoc on her brain. Of necessity, I have become acutely aware of our surroundings and how to make appropriate adjustments. For example, Shelly never misses Taylor's varsity basketball and football games, but we make sure she brings earplugs and sits away from the band and most of the crowd. She can drive, but mostly sticks to the surface streets in our western Phoenix suburbs, and the freeway when traffic is light. The two worst nights of the year for her are the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve, as the fireworks cause her to cry uncontrollably and fill her with fear. There are so many things that can trigger her PTSD, and to see her become so afraid so fast is heartbreaking to me. My biggest goal for us is to find the proper treatment to help combat the effects of her PTSD symptoms.

Two years ago, we moved back to Arizona, which I feel has been the single best thing for Shelly. Friends, sunshine, and familiar surroundings have all been amazing for her. As for her brain injury

symptoms, I am happy and relieved to say that so many of them have improved. The post-traumatic migraine headaches occur far less often now. In my estimation, her motor skills are now eighty percent of what they were prior to her accident. There are areas she still struggles in— for example, her mapping skills are gone, and she struggles with any type of multi-tasking. Simple math has become difficult. Areas of both her short and long-term memory are still affected. She works on brain exercises daily to help with memory and cognition.

Another benefit of being back in Arizona is the wonderful resources that are available. For example, I enjoyed attending the Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona's (BIAAZ) annual Rays of Hope Conference for the first time this past May. While there, I developed a better understanding of the local resources available to assist us in our journey. It was also inspiring to hear the stories of resilience from brain injury survivors such as Billy Thompson and Jim Ledgewood. There were so many nice people I met who are walking a similar path as Shelly and I. It was a great experience, and I'm really looking forward to attending more BIAAZ events in the future.

As Shelly's caregiver, I now know there are many things she can no longer do for herself, but I can't properly express how lucky I am to be around her every day, and how inspiring it is to witness her courageous daily battle. She deals with the ramifications of her brain injury and PTSD with such positivity and grace, I can't help but feel awed by her strength and optimism.

Shelly is truly my hero.

To follow Shelly and Bob's journey, visit Bob's personal blog, [Ten Thousand Days](https://tenthousanddays.blog/), at <https://tenthousanddays.blog/>

