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## Welcome to BIAAZ's monthly newsletter

The Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona is proud to announce a new monthly e-newsletter for its members and supporters. Every month you'll receive inspiring stories of survivors, the latest news in brain injury research and technology, information about BIAAZ events and more, all delivered right to your inbox.

### TBI Survivor Cat Hammes: Moving Forward, Supporting Veterans

"Death isn't ready for me and I'm not ready for death!"

That's the mantra of 49-year-old Cat Hammes. In 2006, the Midwestern trauma nurse and motorcycle enthusiast thought that she had already fielded all of the plot twists that life could throw at her. After falling in love with motorcycles at the age of 16 while sneaking a ride on her older brother's motorcycle, she had a custom motorcycle, a house, and a husband, and owned a small but growing business. To top it all off, she had a career that she loved as a registered nurse.

When Cat was on duty, you could count on her to be cool under the intense pressure of the emergency room as she handled critical care cases.

You can easily picture Cat decompressing after a grueling shift by riding a motorcycle through the idyllic winding hills of Wisconsin; perhaps the ease of the open road on a motorcycle balanced out her high-stress work environment. Then, one spring day in May 2006, everything changed..

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TBI survivor Cat Hammes finds strength and healing in giving back to veterans.



## **Carrie Collins-Fadell: BIAAZ's new executive director**

The board of directors of the Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona is pleased to announce the addition of Carrie Collins-Fadell to the BIAAZ staff this spring. Carrie began her tenure as executive director in April, diving right into several long term projects focusing on fundraising and maintaining the organization's stellar resource facilitation structure.

"Thousands of Arizonians are hospitalized every year for traumatic brain injury," Carrie said. "It is a great use of my time and talents to lead the hard-working BIAAZ staff and work with area professionals to ensure that there are programs, information and referrals available for survivors, caregivers, and those looking to prevent injuries."

Carrie came to the BIAAZ from United Way where she served as executive director and oversaw consecutive 1 million dollar fundraising campaigns. A native of Southeast Michigan, she also served for years as the director of public

policy and marketing for the Alzheimer's Association Michigan Chapters.

Arizona was an easy choice for Carrie and her family when they were looking to relocate to a sunnier climate.

"We've been vacationing in different parts of Arizona for years and just fell in love with everything Arizona," Carrie said.

Carrie and her husband also have several family members and friends living throughout the Valley, including her oldest son who works for the Arizona Diamondbacks.



## **Meet Matthew Riegel: BIAAZ Board of Trustees Member**

The Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona began 2015 with some new faces around the Board of Trustees' conference table. Matthew Riegel, vice president of commercial lending for Northern Trust bank, was welcomed to the BIAAZ board in December.

Although he doesn't have a personal, direct tie to the brain injury community, Matthew said his experience of having a son with Type 1 diabetes has shown him just how important advocacy organizations are.

"I can understand from when [my son] was diagnosed and the help we received from organizations with information that we needed to help him out," Matthew said. "So I can see firsthand what the Brain Injury Alliance does is very impactful."

Matthew hopes his experience in the banking industry will prove beneficial to BIAAZ.

"With my financial background I hope to bring some contacts and knowledge that can help support the organization," Matthew said.

Matthew and his wife came to Arizona from Michigan in 2004. When he's not working, Matthew shares his passion for golf and other outdoor sports with his three sons, a 12-year-old and set of 10-year-old twins.

Matthew, who graduated from Michigan State University as a member of the golf team and went on to golf professionally for two years, is especially enjoying spending time on Arizona's world-famous golf courses with his sons. In the winter, the Riegel family gets back to their Michigan winter roots and goes to Flagstaff for skiing and hockey.

For now, Matthew is ready for his tenure as a BIAAZ board member.

"I look forward to my time on the board and trying to help the organization as best as I possibly can," he said.

## Purple Palooza: Health care centers go above and beyond for Wear Purple Day



Tempe Adult Day Health Services held a day-long obstacle course to celebrate Wear Purple Day 2015.

Every March the Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona asks its members and supporters to wear purple for one day in recognition of Brain Injury Awareness Month.

But for two Arizona companies, wearing purple on March 15 was just the beginning.

At Tempe Adult Day Health Services, staff and residents participated in a day-long obstacle course with challenges designed to be both fun and rehabilitative.

“We wanted to do something where we could include everybody,” Carolyn Hutchens, director, said.

The activities were creative and inclusive.

During “Junk in the Trunk,” competitors strapped tissue boxes filled with whiffle balls around their waists and jumped up and down until all the balls were out of the box. For another challenge, participants to put a long stocking with a softball in the end over their head. They then had to use the softball, hanging from their head like a tail, to knock down water bottles.

“It was entertaining,” Carolyn said.

Competitors also had to weave between obstacles to place a swimming pool noodle in a bucket, run carrying a large ball and complete a football toss.

Carolyn said one of the best aspects of the day was how all the residents got along with one another during the event. As in any living situation that includes a large group of diverse people, there’s occasional discord when music tastes or other preferences collide.

But not on Wear Purple Day.

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“To bring them all together and have them get along so well, that was great,” Carolyn said.

The course was set up as a competition between the seniors and young adults but ended in a tie.

“They had a blast,” Carolyn said. “They asked when we could do it again.”

Tempe wasn’t the only place where purple was part of a good time.

The staff, residents and family members of CareMeridian were enjoying their own luau.

Karen Christiania, director of marketing for CareMeridian, said each year the facility celebrates Wear Purple Day with a different theme and this year’s was a hit.

“It was great,” Karen said.

About 50 people, including staff, patients and patients’ family members from both the Phoenix and Scottsdale residential programs enjoyed relaxing in an island atmosphere.

“We had a steel drum player and the patients loved that,” Karen said.

Patients also enjoyed Hawaiian shaved ice from a food truck.

“It’s so fun for the patients to go up and order what they want,” Karen said.

But it wasn’t all relaxing.

Thanks to Savannah Geare, activities director and recreational therapist, there were plenty of activities that mixed patients’ regular rehabilitation with fun.

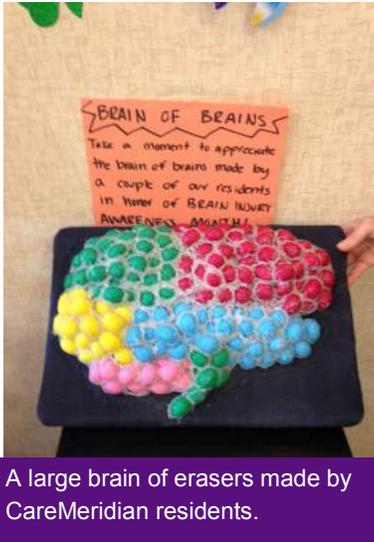
“She always comes up with neat sensory activities,” Karen said. “Everything was focused on brain injury and rehabilitation, we did memory games and things like that.”

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CareMeridian celebrated Wear Purple Day 2015 with a luau complete with a Hawaiian shaved ice truck.

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A large brain of erasers made by CareMeridian residents.

And, the luau gave patients a chance to showcase an impressively large brain made from erasers patients created with a little guidance from Savannah.

The luau was also the debut of a video Savannah made in which patients answered the question what family and friends could do help brain injury survivors.

Some brain injury survivors wore purple bracelets made by former CareMeridian resident Jesse Gurecki.

Even Bozzie, a rescued 9-year-old black Labrador German Shepard and permanent CareMeridian resident, wore a purple bandanna.

Karen said the best part of the event is that it includes everyone involved with CareMeridian.

“It’s great to have both groups come together,” Karen said.

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Cat woke up in a hospital to learn that a motorcycle accident had left her with skull fractures, broken bones, a collapsed lung, and extensive injuries to both legs. She would eventually lose her left leg below the knee, and she describes her right leg as two-thirds metal in a nod to the repairs that have gone into keeping it functional. Gone in an instant was Cat’s most prized possession, an American-made 2006 Harley Davidson Fat-boy, and the freedom that came with it seemed not far behind.

As she struggled to heal, she had to adjust to life as an amputee and her future became filled with question marks. There were the practical aspects of her life that changed. Her house, with all of its stairs, was daunting to return home to. Then there were the emotional aspects: every area of her life now required an adjustment. Cat, a natural people person, had taken pride in her work and the care she provided her patients, but she would no longer be able to return to work in the bustling emergency room. She was also unable to get to her small business during her extensive recovery period and found herself unable to support herself.

***“I am not rich in monetary things, but I am in the things that cannot be measured. So I give back with time, respect & honor, my most prized possession that I have.”***

~ TBI survivor Cat Hammes

To meet Cat today is to meet a glowing, confident, strong, and optimistic woman. When I met her in Texas last spring, her smile lit up the San Antonio sky and she was surrounded by friends.

Yet Cat describes her fight to reclaim her life in 2006 as the fight of her life and her fight back from hell. She was in her early 40s, a time where you should be reaping the rewards of the hard work of your 20s and 30s.

Instead, in a cruel twist, everything she held dear and worked so hard for was slipping away.

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How did she get through it? At her darkest hour, she says it was her ability to connect with others and understand their struggles (a skill no doubt honed during her time as a registered ER nurse) that carried her through. As Cat underwent grueling physical therapy, had a prosthetic leg fitted, and healed her spirit, she found herself connecting with injured veterans who were undergoing or had undergone many of the same life transitions and therapies as her. She promised herself she would do all she could to help those who were injured while protecting our freedom.

Cat became active in many different veterans' charities and found it unacceptable that so many of our nation's homeless, one out of every four, are veterans. She knew she had to do something big for the summer of 2014 to raise awareness and money for some of her favorite charities. And so was born Cat's idea for a cross-country motorcycle ride: the 2014 Iron & Ash Ride for Warriors benefitting veterans charities.

Cat kicked off the Iron & Ash ride on May 31 from Bulverde, Texas, outside of San Antonio. The ride took her across the country with additional fundraising and promotional stops in Alabama, Virginia, and West Virginia, and finally to Chicago for a June 15 wrap-up party. Deciding to dedicate the ride and raise money for veterans' charities was an easy call for Cat who would also like to see Americans do more to honor Vietnam Veterans.

"The reason America has all of its greatness, power, freedom is because it was secured by this country's veterans," Cat says. "I am not rich in monetary things, but I am in the things that cannot be measured. So I give back with time, respect & honor, my most prized possession that I have."

How does Cat, known as the one-legged blonde in the motorcycle community, feel about life today? Well, in July, she posted this on Facebook: "*Life isn't going to hand you your dreams so make them happen!*" And boy, does she ever. Currently, Cat tours the country participating in charity rides and giving motivational speeches. She has advice for others recovering from traumas.

When we spoke that beautiful, sunny day, she said that in her own experience with an amputation and as someone living with a Traumatic Brain Injury, there are times she still wants to scream, "I'm not a freak!"

Some people make callous statements out of ignorance, or perhaps fear. If you know someone recovering, offer patience and kindness, not pity. If you are with someone going through trauma, Cat encourages you to recognize that trauma has stages of grief; her trauma was a death of everything she knew. She also encourages you that it won't last forever. Surround yourself with positive influences and get rid of the negative ones, which are toxic to your recovery. Know that it is okay to grieve the life you lost and recognize that some people will say stupid things, but those don't have to change your experience. Forgive them and move on.



TBI survivor Cat Hammes didn't let her TBI diminish her love of the open road.

# Eighteen years after: Tamara Greenspan reflects on life post-TBI

On October 25, 1996 Tamara Greenspan had been 16 years old for a little less than a month and life was good. The summer before, she had been crowned Miss American Coed and in many ways was a typical high school student. Until she and girlfriend decided to grab a slice of pizza in North Babylon, New York. Within seconds, everything for Tamara changed.

The two teenage girls crossed the multi-lane road to a traffic island in the center, waited for oncoming traffic to pass and, not seeing any cars approach, made their way across several more lanes. Tamara's friend paused to check her beeper, the pre-cellphone must-have teen accessory, just as a car turned onto the road without using a blinker. Because Tamara's friend had stopped, the vehicle missed her by mere inches.

Tamara, however, was hit head-on so hard she slid onto the car's hood. Her head slammed into the car's windshield before she flew off the car about 20 feet into traffic. Fortunately, several members of the volunteer fire department were at a sweet sixteen birthday party less than a block away and arrived on the scene quickly. While they administered to her and waited for a life flight helicopter, Tamara's heart stopped three times.

For about the next two months, Tamara was in a coma, four and half weeks of which she spent on life support. When Tamara did wake up, she had the mentality of a fourth grader and no memory of the accident.

The total memory gap and lack of mental ability to process what she was told had occurred was one of the more difficult and disorienting aspects of Tamara's recovery.

"I don't get it," Tamara said. "It happened to me, shouldn't I be the first to know?"

A week before being discharged from the hospital, Tamara again asked her mom why she was there. Her mom explained that she had been in a serious car accident, but Tamara still struggled to understand the *why*.

"I remembered my room and this wasn't my room," Tamara said. "I couldn't comprehend how everyone knew but me. The connection just didn't go together in my brain."

Tamara struggled with the disconnection for years. No matter how many times she met a person, she would introduce herself by saying, "Hi, I was hit by a car."

"And they would say, 'Yeah Tammy, I know' and I would say, 'And I broke a lot of bones,' as if they didn't know," Tamara said.

Tamara's physical recovery began with a month in the ICU unit, transfer to a brain injury rehabilitation facility. From February 1997 to June 1999, Tamara went to an outpatient hospital from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Through it all, Tamara clung to a saying her mother had told her comatose body every day before Tamara woke up: "A winner never quits and a quitter never wins."

"That basically became my life motto," Tamara said.

As with many brain injury survivors, Tamara's accident brought a slew of physical changes.

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Tamara Greenspan, 34, with her brother Torin Greenspan. Tammy received a traumatic brain injury 18 years ago when she was hit by a car.

# BIAAZ's annual Rays of Hope Conference



From left to right: Jose Escobedo , Valentina Tarango, Chrystal Snyder, the panel moderator, and Mark Cesar discussed lessons they learned post brain injury at this year's annual Rays of Hope Conference.

## Panelists discuss lessons learned post-brain injury

On May 1, 2015, a panel of three brain injury survivors told their stories of injury, rehabilitation, and recovery in a session entitled “Returning to Productive Activity.” Valentina Tarango, José Escobedo, and Mark Cesar shared challenges faced and lessons learned after brain injury. Although each story was different, the speakers shared many common experiences with each other and with members of the audience as well.

Valentina, a stroke survivor, has found productive work as a volunteer with the Arizona Bridge to Independent Living (ABIL) and with the Grace Thrift Shop in her community. José, who had a brain aneurysm at age 19, is now interviewing for jobs. He has received several job offers but is holding out for the right job to match his skills and his needs for accommodation. Mark, whose brain injury occurred during a catastrophic car crash, sustained a number of additional injuries to his body and was in a wheelchair for a time. He returned to work after healing physically but before he was really aware of the impacts of his brain injury and how this might affect his work.

Some important themes emerged during the panelists' discussion.

**1. Redefinition.** For Valentina and José, who had to re-learn basic functions like how to walk and talk during their rehabilitation, it was clear that they were redefining themselves and their abilities as they regained brain function. Mark, on the other hand, was aware of how his broken bones affected him but only learned over time that his thinking and job performance had changed, too. It was as he struggled to adapt to changing work assignments that he began to identify the changes in his brain and his behavior.

**2. Communication.** Each of the speakers is in an ongoing process of learning how to communicate their abilities, limitations, and needs for accommodation and support in more effective ways. Valentina has found a set of comfortable duties in both of her volunteer jobs that feel easy to accomplish.

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José is working with his vocational rehabilitation counselor to assess each job offer he receives to make sure that the requirements of the job are a good fit for his abilities.

For example, a job that involves standing all day would not be feasible for him. Mark described a job experience in which his co-workers understood his strengths and accommodated his limits. He contrasted that experience with the frustration he found with another job in which he was expected to work beyond his capabilities, even after he had done his best to communicate his limits.

**3. Patience and perseverance.** Each of the speakers talked about hopes for the future and the steps each of them is taking. Valentina wants to progress from her volunteer work to a part-time job. An Army veteran, she has begun an application through the VA for vocational rehabilitation assistance toward that goal. José revels in his successful return to driving. He continues his job search and is making plans to move from his mother's house once he is employed. Mark recently retired from his job but wants to find new work. He has started making lists of what he loves to do and does well and what he needs from his next work environment to support his success.

As we opened the discussion up to the audience, many of the participants shared their own stories of redefinition and learning to communicate. They applauded the panelists for their willingness to share the lessons they have learned. In story after story, the power of perseverance came through as a dominant theme. Brain injury is certainly a set-back for those who experience it. Yet participants emphasized the efforts they made, their persistence over time, and the rewards of each accomplishment along the way.

Valentina made a comment that seems a good way to end this report: "After my stroke, I learned how to be patient and really listen. I'm a better person for that."



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She was left with a large indentation fracture in her skull. Hitting the windshield exacerbated issues Tamara already had with her left eye, causing her cornea to rupture and the lens of her eye to pop out. After seven surgeries on both eyes, Tamara's left eye still wandered due to a fixed palsy.

Her hands, on which she had essentially crash landed, were scarred, as was her belly.

For a former beauty queen and active pageant participant like Tamara, the changes in her appearance added another layer of emotional strife to her recovery.

"I didn't look normal," Tamara said. "Before the accident, if I dressed up, I turned heads."

Tamara didn't get a glimpse of herself until nearly a year and a half after the accident. It was a traumatic experience. When she did, it was a traumatic experience.

"One day I woke up and I went to the bathroom and I looked in the mirror and I screamed bloody hell," Tamara said.

Her mother rushed into the bathroom asking what was wrong.

"And I asked her, 'Why didn't you tell me I looked like this?'"

Tamara saw her uneven clavicles, an indentation fracture so large "you could rest an egg in it," and hair that always appeared knotty and dirty.

But to her family, she already looked better than she had in the hospital.

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They were thinking I looked pretty good,” she said.

Still, Tamara had a lot of support from the pageant community during her hospitalization and afterwards. One organization took out a full-page ad in the newspaper for her, and an acquaintance preparing for the national round of the Miss American Coed Pageant found time to visit Tamara regularly. The girls remain good friends today.

When Tamara attended the New York state Miss American Coed pageant as visiting royalty just a year after her accident she said “they did this huge thing on stage for me.”

Tamara even competed again in 2001, earning a spot in the top 10 in the national Miss American Coed pageant, where she was crowned Miss New York American Coed.

When her mother thanked, one of the judges afterwards, the judge told Tamara’s mom, “It wasn’t me, it was all her. She earned it.”

***“I had to grow up all over again, I had to re-identify myself...It took me 10 years to really accept the accident, to look at it as a blessing rather than a curse.”***

**~ Tamara Greenspan,  
34, who received a TBI  
as a teenager**

Even after that, Tamara gave truth to a pageant adage that “old queens never die, they just become staff,” working behind the scenes of the pageant. She would help choreograph opening numbers, coach contestants and assist in the dressing room.

Still, Tamara struggled to accept her new normal. People still stared at her, but not in the same way as before.

“I don’t walk the same, I used to walk very elegantly,” Tamara said. “I still have the same, if not extremely similar, personality, but people treat me differently. It’s almost like I have owls blinking at me.”

Finishing high school was a monumental challenge as well.

“My memory wasn’t ‘normal’,” Tamara said. “I would remember some things, but then I wouldn’t remember anything.”

She recalled the large support network that helped her to pass an especially daunting history exam. Her mom studied with her regularly. A neighbor came over twice a week to help. She had a study group.

“I passed by three points,” Tamara said.

And when Tamara did earn her diploma, it was as an honor roll student and recipient of three scholarships and the Conrad Hecht Memorial Award.

Slowly but surely, as time put distance between Tamara and the accident and her body began to heal, she began to accept her new normal, though it was a long journey. Even now, Tamara said the most challenging part of her recover was “accepting the new me.”

“I had to grow up all over again, I had to re-identify myself,” Tamara said. “It took me 10 years to really accept the accident, to look at it as a blessing rather than a curse.”

Today, Tamara easily rattles off a list of life events she is grateful the “the bump” brought into her life: graduating high school with honors, competing in a pageant again, being featured in *Pageantry Magazine* and on *The Montel Williams Show*, a head injury book special collection named after her in the Farmington Public library. Even her brother, she said, would not have met his current wife were it not for her accident.

“If that bump never happened, I wouldn’t be who I am or where or I am today,” Tamara, now 34, said.

With acceptance has come an ability to get know herself again outside the context of her accident. When people ask about her eyes, instead of telling them the whole story of her accident, Tamara just says she’s had vision issues since her youth. She no longer thinks of herself as “Tamara with a head injury.”

“It’s a part of my life and I will have problems for the rest of my life because of it,” Tamara said. “But it doesn’t define my life. I’m not going to let my head injury [be] my life, I am going to live my life around it.”

WITH HEARTS FULL OF GRATITUDE, THE BRAIN INJURY ALLIANCE OF ARIZONA THANKS ITS SPONSORS FOR THEIR SUPPORT.



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S U P P O R T

**Need support?** BIAAZ facilitates several survivor and caregiver support groups that meet monthly throughout the Valley. Check out our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/BrainInjuryAllianceAZ](http://www.facebook.com/BrainInjuryAllianceAZ) for more information. Or, ask to subscribe to our e-Blasts by emailing [Info@BIAAZ.org](mailto:Info@BIAAZ.org).