



The Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona Brings Unmasking Brain Injury to Arizona

This spring it was announced that the global two-year-old visual art and education project, Unmasking Brain Injury, will be coming to Arizona. The Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona (BIAAZ) will be making this exciting project available throughout the state. Laura Johnson, who has personal brain injury experience, is a new BIAAZ team member who will be spearheading the project as the Unmasking Brain Injury Arizona director.

Q Please tell us about yourself and your background.

A I grew up in Syracuse, New York. In 1990, my family moved out to Phoenix. After graduating from Phoenix Country Day School, I went back east for college and received a B.A. in business administration with a minor in art history from Northeastern University in Boston. Subsequently, I worked as a general manager for Williams-Sonoma in both Boston and New York City, and fell in love with the visual merchandising aspect of the industry. I love being able to tell a story through creativity.

Art and design have always been a passion of mine. In 2003, due to ongoing health problems, I relocated to Phoenix to be closer to my family. I was battling severe head and spinal pain, vertigo, numbness, and depth perception problems, and was no longer able to perform the intense



physical demands of retail. My parents, who really do know me best, supported me to follow my passion for art, so I enrolled in the Art Institute of Phoenix to pursue a degree in interior design and architecture.

December 7, 2007 — the date that my and my family's lives changed forever. I only had six classes left to complete for my final graduate project and degree when, out of nowhere, I blacked out while at home, hit the back of my head on marble tile, and sustained a traumatic brain injury with frontal lobe damage. It was never determined what caused the black out!

Traumatic brain injury. A what? I had never heard of or known anyone who had endured one.

Really? My frontal lobe? In one instant, I had been stripped of the qualities I identified with, including the innate pride of being a workaholic. I didn't know me anymore. I had always excelled at decision making; I was highly detail-oriented and efficient; a savant at multitasking, organization, project management, and problem solving. Now my "broken" frontal lobe could not think its way out of a paper bag, even if said bag was open at both ends and cut down the middle.

Thank goodness for my parents, who were relentless in seeking the care that I needed. They were finally able to find Dr. Christina Kwasnica at Valley Physical Medicine in Phoenix. Six months after my injury, I was accepted into The Barrow Center for Transitional Neurorehabilitation's (CTN) Work Re-entry Program. Thus, began the long process of tough love, understanding, recovery, rehabilitation, and ultimately, acceptance.

Q What is the Unmasking Brain Injury project?

A This project gives survivors a voice and a way to tell their story through art. I am a big believer in holistic therapies, such as art and music therapy, and this project outlines a non-threatening framework for individuals to design and create a mask representing their journey. It is crucial to understand that each person's journey is unique and special.

I think the way it is laid out is just so cool— we provide a mask kit and a "road map" with suggestions, which people can choose to use or not. It's not just about decorating a mask; I think the process in getting there is part of what is so revealing. To start, individuals can identify feelings associated with their brain injury through brainstorming emotions and/or struggles. The fun part is when survivors then translate these emotions into shapes, colors, or images using whatever medium they would like (collage, beads, paint, papers, stickers, etc.), and create the art work on the mask.

Brain injury does not discriminate and can affect anyone of any age, gender, or race, at any time. This world-wide project is a collective effort to educate and spread the word about the prevalence of both acquired brain injuries, (including aneurysms, anoxia, brain tumors, encephalitis, meningitis, metabolic disorders, and strokes), as well as traumatic brain injuries, and the impact they have on so many people; not just survivors, but the families, loved ones, and caregivers involved in the ongoing recovery as well.

Once the masks have been created, I will be collecting and cataloguing the stories behind the masks. Then, I think what is most exciting is that in 2019, all of the collected masks will be displayed throughout communities state-wide in an



effort to promote brain injury awareness. I think this is a special component to the project; the creators of the masks will get to see their stories come to life!

Q What do you want people to get out of the Unmasking Brain Injury project?

A While the primary mission of the project is to “promote awareness of the prevalence of brain injury, and to give survivors a voice and the means to educate others about what it’s like to live with a brain injury,” I also think it’s a therapeutic way for individuals (including me) to help transfer emotions from our heads and into something physical and beautiful. It’s a way to showcase our ups and downs, the positives and negatives, the struggles and successes, and to use this platform to show others what our “new” world looks like.



I do also hope that in raising awareness for brain injury, we will be able to reach out and touch new individuals, community partners, and populations outside of the medical community. We need to obtain new sponsorships that will not only help to fund and sustain this project, but other Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona resources and programs as well. It takes a village, and in the world of brain injury, support is critical.

This project is open for anyone to participate in and no one needs to have any experience or background in art. For additional information regarding the project, to have a presentation done in the community, or to host a mask making event, or to have a mask mailed directly to you, please email me at unmasking@biaaz.org.

Q What do you enjoy doing when you are not working?

A I still haven’t mastered the art of life balance! I continue to work incredibly hard each day so that I can maintain part-time employment, get enough rest, attend medical appointments, exercise, maintain a healthy life style, and still have time for fun. I have to say the hardest part for me still is the social aspect of recovery. Social anxiety and isolation still linger, which is something I hear all the time from survivors. Pain and fatigue can make it hard to want to do anything, which is why balance is so important. (I can hear my mother and doctors saying that in my head now)!

I have a small circle of family and select friends, and my dog Sophie, who is my everything! I love to read, (something I am only starting to do again after 10 years!), watch movies, hike, and sail. I am slowly getting into meditation and holistic practices, although I still struggle with the inner workaholic mind-set and can never



seem to shut off completely— baby steps! I love to travel, but have not done much since my injury, and the one thing I swear I am going to do one day is start painting!

Q Any final thoughts?

A Honestly, pinch me! If you had told me 10-and-a-half-years ago I would be heading up the Unmasking Brain Injury project, I would have laughed, cried, probably gotten angry, and never believed you in a million years. This project is the culmination of my life experiences: health setbacks, education, love of art, previous work in design, project management, and the past six years of non-profit work in our community. I cannot believe I have

the important role for the state of Arizona to help raise awareness and guide people through art to tell their stories.

In 2009, when I graduated from the Art Institute of Phoenix, my mother gave me a simple black-and-white card that said, “just when the caterpillar thought its world was over, it became a butterfly.” Guess what? For me, I think it has just happened!

You can find more information about the Unmasking Brain Injury project online at BIAAZ.org/unmasking. You can contact Laura at unmasking@biaaz.org for information about requesting a mask or sponsoring the two-year project.

PHOTO CREDIT: CLINTON R. MCDANIEL



The Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona (BIAAZ) is excited to bring *Unmasking Brain Injury*, a visual art and education project, to Arizona.

The objective of this project is to have each person living with a brain injury, create a mask that depicts the hidden feelings behind their brain injury. All masks will be displayed in 2019 throughout our state in an effort to raise awareness and give survivors a voice through storytelling and art therapy.



To learn more about the Unmasking Brain Injury project please visit BIAAZ.org/unmasking or contact Laura Johnson at unmasking@biaaz.org to request masks, host a mask making event or for additional information about how to sponsor the project.

