



**Brain Injury
Alliance**
ARIZONA

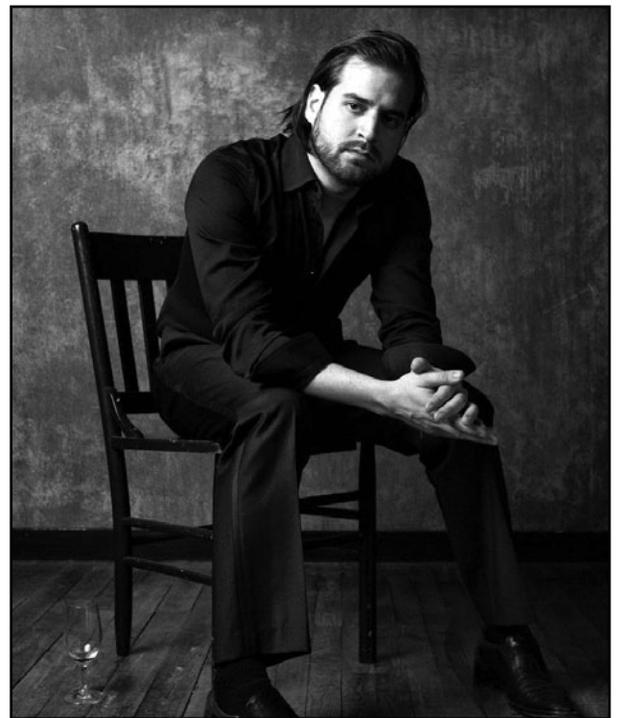
Entrepreneur Greg Costa Wants TBI Survivors to Handle Themselves and Each Other with Love

As a drummer and musician, Greg Costa traveled the world and played at sold-out shows. However, his most important role might just be serving as an advocate for TBI survivors. Greg talked with BIAAZ's Brittany Sweeney about life after brain injury.

One thing Greg Costa could never be accused of being is boring. After all, how many people can say they spent 10 years of their childhood in a Portuguese dance group? Greg can, because he did. But Mr. Costa has never been comfortable solely resting on past laurels, even though his previous accomplishments include volunteer work in Honduras, where he and his dad built 32 homes in two weeks, as well as moving from the small town of Sweetwater, Florida to Nashville when he was 21 in order to pursue a career in music. For Greg, music wasn't just a job or far-fetched dream—it was his life. Upon arriving in Tennessee, he went straight to work, and eventually started meeting big names like Faith Hill and Tim McGraw while doing drum tech (a process involving providing quality sounds for studio records). As his name and work began to precede him, Greg found himself transitioning from drum tech to showcase drummer, spending his days touring and performing with the likes of well-known bands such as the alt-rock band Cake and Three Doors Down. He found that being on the road suited him better than being in a studio all day. Things were really going Greg's way.

Until suddenly, they weren't.

In March 2010 when he was just 28 years old, Greg was pushed down a flight of stairs. He



was then rushed to the hospital in a state of unconsciousness. When he finally came to, all he remembered was asking to call his dad, who told him to let the doctors do whatever they needed to do to help him. Greg complied. But stabilizing him was only the beginning, because after being released from the hospital, Greg harbored an undiagnosed brain injury for six months and found himself in a lot of pain, relying on pre-

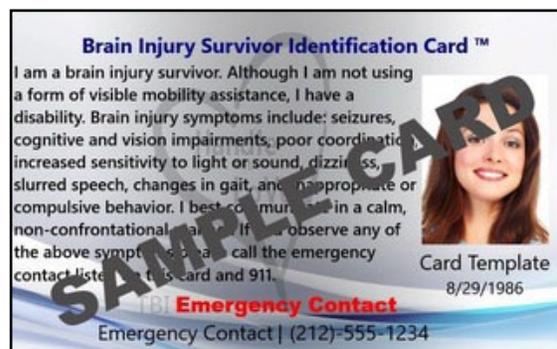
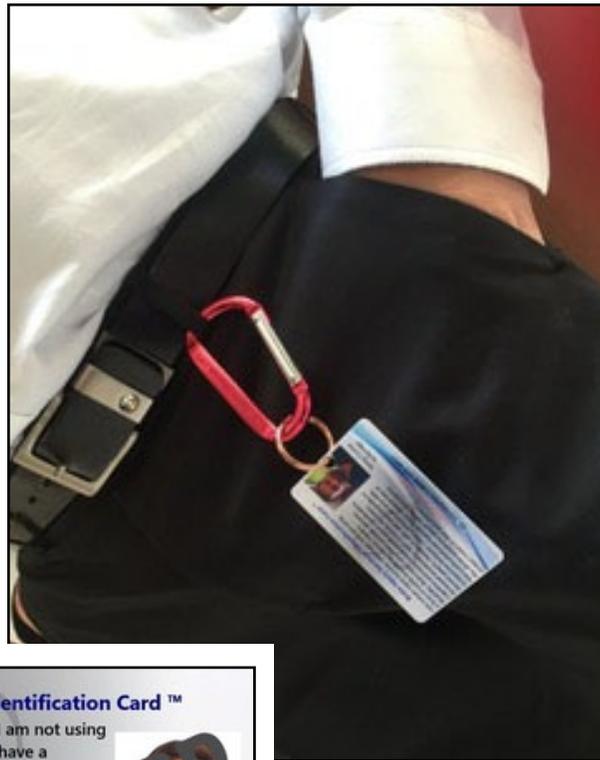
scribed medications and bed rest for relief. After seeing a specialist who informed Greg that his fall had caused a traumatic brain injury (TBI), further testing led to the discovery of an arachnoid cyst in his brain that had likely been there for most of his life. He had never understood before why there had always been a pounding in his head that would travel through his entire body. Receiving a diagnosis for the pain that had plagued him for so many years provided Greg with a helpful understanding of his condition, as well as options for treatment.

Life after a brain injury is so unique for each individual because each individual is so unique. For Greg, one of the hardest parts of the recovery process has been letting himself grieve who he used to be, what he used to be capable of, and even what he used to look like. Most people are familiar with mourning for their loved ones who have passed, but mourning for a living family member? A friend? One-self? It's just not a topic that's talked about much. Greg says it's only in the last few months that he's started to understand the magnitude of his injury and come to terms with his new reality.

In addition to a lost sense of self, Greg also lost his career as a drummer. He went from playing in front of thousands of people every night to not being able to stand crowds. His injury caused him to become acutely sensitive to sound (he especially hates ticking noises). As he was also constantly in an incredible amount of pain, he was no longer able to keep up with the rigorous schedule of a traveling performer. On top of it all, Mr. Costa's house in Tennessee flooded during a storm, and he lost both his home and most of the memories and personal treasures that were trapped inside.

Fortunately, Greg isn't one to give up when the going gets tough, though he acknowledges that brain injury survivors face many obstacles, one of the main ones being that most people don't understand what a brain injury really is. "It's a difficult thing to live with; it can suck," he candidly admits. "[It] isn't something that just goes away."

In accepting that a brain injury is now part of his journey, Greg has learned a few important lessons along the way, such as how, for the



most part, brain injury is treated symptomatically and not as an individual condition, which can result in some doctors or specialists believing there is a one-size-fits-

all approach, when in reality, the treatments and medications that work for one individual won't necessarily yield the same results for another. However, he has also learned there are some symptoms commonly faced by many survivors, such as the limits of physical and mental stamina. These days, Greg is working on setting boundaries for himself to preserve his energy for what really matters. "I don't necessarily know how I'll feel tomorrow... sometimes I need to just stop and slow down because I'm doing too much," he shares. Of course, even though he never asked for a brain injury in the first place, he still has found a way to be thankful for his situation because, as he puts it, "it has allowed me to mentor others and save lives."

From this passionate desire to reach out and serve the brain injury population, a vision was born—Handle with LoVe, a company with a simple yet powerful goal—to remind survivors that no matter what they're going through, it is important they treat themselves and others with love and kindness. While Greg was developing his company, the words of his father, a



firefighter and hero in his own right, rang in his ears: "When you see a need, fill it." The more aware Greg became of the prejudice and fear he and his fellow survivors constantly experienced, the clearer it became there was indeed a need for greater knowledge and understanding about brain injury and its effects.

So, how does Handle with LoVe fulfill Greg's mission to spread kindness and understanding? Primarily by creating and selling individualized wallet cards that help survivors self-identify to police, medical specialists, and other authority figures who may be unfamiliar with brain injury. The card comes with a photo of the survivor, a personalized list of his or her brain injury symptoms, and the information of an emergency contact. The card is waterproof and has the option for chip encoding for security and verification purposes. Additionally available through the Handle with LoVe website is swag such as t-shirts and bracelets, with proceeds from each sale used to fund wallet cards for survivors who otherwise might not be able to afford them. Greg also uses Handle with LoVe as a platform for reaching out world-wide to provide survivor-to-survivor mentorship services to those with brain injury-related questions and concerns. While not a certified brain injury professional, Greg finds great value and merit in using his experiences in navigating the healthcare system and life's daily activities as a brain injury survivor to mentor and assist fellow survivors.

In many ways, Greg is his own best customer; he refuses to go anywhere without his brain injury wallet I.D. card in case he ever finds himself in an emergency situation. But he's also seen how having an I.D. card can positively affect the lives of other survivors too. One gentleman with a brain injury Greg knows personally was constantly getting brought in by the police for what they perceived as aggressive behavior when they approached him. According to Greg, after getting a card, this gentleman hasn't had any problematic interactions with the authorities since.

Currently, Greg is looking to the future and is hoping to expand Handle with LoVe's reach by collaborating with other companies in order to raise greater awareness of brain injury, as well as procure additional funding to produce and provide as many wallet I.D. cards for survivors as possible. As someone who has struggled to

get back on his feet after his injury, Greg would one day like to employ other survivors to market and sell Handle with LoVe products so they can be self-sufficient, make a profit, and overall, have a sense of purpose. Eventually, he would also like to see his company become an international symbol for brain injury.

In addition to all the sweat and tears he is putting into making Handle with LoVe a success, Greg also has several other plans and projects in the works. At the moment, he is writing a book called *Driving Naked with God*, which discusses becoming more vulnerable, letting God take the driver's seat in life, and learning to look through the windshield (toward the future), instead of dwelling on what's in the rearview mirror (past mistakes). Greg is hoping to publish the book sometime next year. He also has an upcoming interview with the magazine *Modern Drummer*, where he will open up about how TBI can affect a drummer's brain.

Greg will also soon be welcoming Nia into his life, a service dog that has been trained at a facility back east in Tennessee called Wilderwood Service Dogs. Greg has been working hard and fundraising for Nia (service animals like her can cost upwards of \$20,000). He believes the sacrifice will be well worth it though, as Nia will be able to perform tasks such as reminding him when to eat and recovering important lost items. Additionally, she will provide a sense of loyalty and companionship. For others interested in owning their own canine companion, Greg recommends working with an organization that understands service dog breeds and provides the dogs with extensive training.

Another upcoming goal on Greg's radar involves taking part in the van life movement, which involves decorating a van inside and out, according to personal preference, and living on the road. The process isn't cheap, and can be time-consuming, as the van must be outfitted with electricity, solar power, and proper bedding. In spite of the challenges, however, this adventurous lifestyle appeals to the part of Greg that loved traveling as an on-the-road percussionist pre-injury. Additionally, van life has the added bonus of allowing him to visit Brain Injury Alliances across the country, and meet and mentor survivors wherever he goes. And who knows? One day, Greg, Nia, and his van might even make it out to Arizona!

