

Self Help Stories: Survivor helps self by helping others

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RECORD STAFF

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KITCHENER -- Life can change in a moment, observes Kim Collier.

For Collier, that moment came on a winter's night in 1995, on a country road in the passenger seat of a friend's car. When the driver swerved to avoid a deer, the car found an icy patch of pavement and struck a tree.

"After that, I don't remember much," she says, only the bleeding from a large gash on her face caused when her head struck the windshield.

What followed were two surgeries to her face, the painful installation of dental implants, occasional seizures and 10 months of rehabilitation at the Canadian Back Institute in Waterloo.

As well, Collier suffered a severe head injury, a life-altering and untreatable condition.

Collier was an artist and a teacher.

Now, instead of the hectic and chaotic atmosphere she once thrived in, she spends almost all of her time in the calming atmosphere of her home.

She can no longer drive and relies on others for transportation.

"I was working 60 to 70 hours a week. I worked for an advertising company, I taught at Conestoga College, and I had my own business," she says

"And then, overnight, there were some days when I couldn't even feed myself. I know that I will probably never work again."

While she was receiving therapy, Collier heard about the Head Injury Association -- which provides support and social activities for people who have suffered life-altering injuries. It's based in Kitchener, but serves about 300 people throughout Waterloo Region and Wellington County.

About 40 per cent of its financial support comes from the United Way campaigns in Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge and Guelph.

For Collier, who was dealing with the depressive side-effects of her injuries and treatments and a draining battle with an insurance company to recover her benefits, the Head Injury Association offered a place to go and people to interact with.

It's made a huge difference in her life.

"I realized there were a lot of people in worse shape than I was," she says.

The Head Injury Association equipped Collier with a computer, and taught her how to use it. Now she writes the association's newsletter from her home.

And because of her artistic background, she leads the association's crafts program.

"It gave me a purpose, and a sense that I was not the only one having these difficulties. I was no longer focusing on my own existence, and it made me feel better about myself," says Collier.

The computer has allowed her to get online and interact with other people.

"It gets to you, being in your house for four years. You get detached, like you're no longer a part of the world."

She never lost her artistic abilities, and the computer allows her to express her creativity in a different way than before.

Head injuries, she says, are difficult to understand because they affect every individual differently. "For most people, it's not a pin-pointable thing. It can be so vague and so varied.

"Even the doctors don't understand it," says Collier.

"My memory was affected, and my multi-tasking abilities were affected. And your emotions go weird. Little things upset you, and trying to get people to understand that can be very difficult.

"For 80 per cent of the people, having a head injury gives them a different outlook on life. You appreciate the smaller things much more."

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Goal: \$5,120,000

Present: \$2,406,400

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