

REBOUNDERS: Miss Oregon is a brain injury survivor

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contact though they often felt like holing up inside their houses. They shared small victories. Kirk, for example, had opened a shampoo bottle using only her left hand, rather than the two hands the job had required since her stroke.

Three years ago, Kirk's life careened into unfamiliar territory. She had been enjoying an out-of-town girls' weekend, when the first stroke struck. One of her friends, a nurse, rushed her to the hospital where Kirk had a second, more severe stroke. Afterwards, she couldn't move her left side.

"I couldn't sit up in bed," she said. "I just fell over."

Kirk still struggles with brain fog.

"It's like feeling lost in a familiar place," she said. "I wake up every morning that way."

Once an accountant at Boise Cascade and a Pilot Rock city councilwoman, she now works as a dishwasher at the Pilot Rock School District.

"They call me 'assistant cook,' but I'm really a dishwasher," she said of the job, which she called a gift. "Working at the school is like cheap therapy. I'm so thankful to the school district for that."

Salina's memories of the accident that injured his brain are hazy.

"A deer came through my driver-side window," he said. "I don't remember much about the accident except for the sound of shattering glass."

Like Kirk, Salina's brain injury interfered with the ability to do his job, in Salina's case, working with developmentally challenged individuals. He felt confused and frustrated. Information was coming in, "but wasn't getting processed — everything was jumbled."

"It's just completely different," he said. "Before, I had 20 things going on all at once and I knew where I left off from one thing to the next. Now I start doing the laundry and forget I am boiling an egg."

Salina said he misses his formerly agile brain. He now keeps a list and tackles tasks one after the other. "I feel lost in my mind most of the time," he said.

Improvement comes at sometimes frustratingly glacial speed and they learn to celebrate the wins when they happen.

St. Anthony Hospital speech and language pathologist Ailea Villanueva guides the Rebounders, which met at Suttle Care & Retirement last week, but normally gathers at 10 a.m. the first Friday of each month at the hospital. At the latest session, Villanueva listed off some famous brain injury survivors such as Abraham Lincoln (thrown from horse) and actress Sharon Stone (stroke).

"Did you know the current Miss Oregon is a brain injury survivor?" Villanueva asked the group.

Ali Wallace sustained a head injury in 2009 during high school cheerleading practice, landing headfirst on a hardwood floor. The 21-year-old still experiences migraines and balance issues and sometimes struggles to recall words. On Sunday, she will compete in the Miss America pageant where she plans to use traumatic brain injury as her platform.

The Pendleton survivors face some of the same challenges as Wallace, without the limelight.

Villanueva said there are more stroke survivors than TBI survivors in the Rebounders, though at one time the ratio was 50-50. Those with TBI tend to be younger.

The meetings offer members a safe place to socialize, play brain games and compare ideas.

"They are always learning new ways to strategize and cope," Villanueva said.

Both Kirk and Salina said they became less social after their brain trauma, but find a healthy, social outlet during their monthly Rebounders sessions. The group also helps them figure out a realistic path into the future.

"They must develop their new normal," said Villanueva, who helped start the club two

and a half years ago. "Some can't return to work, but they can return productively in another capacity."

Kirk is inching her way to her new normal and is even learning to appreciate her altered brain. She feels calmer, she said, less Type A. Some changes are baffling — she talks rapid-fire now instead of at the cadence she used pre-stroke — but Kirk is learning to let her old self go.

"You wake up and have to accept you'll never be that person again," Kirk said. "I work at being the best person I can be."

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EO Media Group file photo
Abi Wallace, of Portland, hugs Miss Oregon 2014, Rebecca Anderson, after being crowned Miss Oregon 2015 during the Miss Oregon scholarship competition at the Seaside Convention Center in June.

FLAG: May save it for good weather, special occasions

Continued from 1A

Cathy said people have been honking, stopping by and calling to express their appreciation for the show of patriotism. One person told the family they pulled over by the side of Westland Road in the middle of the night to watch the flag blow in the wind for a while because it looked so majestic.

Cathy said Lawrence didn't put up the flag to get praise, but the family is glad to hear that other people are enjoying it.

"My husband's phone has been ringing off the hook," she said.

At night the flag is "mesmerizing," she said, as it unfurls and twists back around the pole again in the wind while lit by spotlights as required for nighttime display of the American flag.

Cathy said the family has a somewhat smaller flag that they might end up displaying part of the year instead to preserve the bigger, more expensive flag for better weather and special occasions.

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