

March 2016: Brain Injury Awareness Month

By Stephanie M. Freeman



school near my hometown. Because March is Brain Injury Awareness Month, I was invited to come discuss some of the stages I had with my brain injury and how I dealt with it. They were interested in how I used my running and activity to get through the hard times. I was delighted to do it because I have a special interest in helping children recognize the symptoms of brain trauma and how to seek help when needed. I began talking to them, and they were unaware that March was the month to recognize this so I went into some detail of that.

I always begin by introducing myself and saying, "I am Stephanie, a marathon runner." One child looks up at me and says she remembered me well when I ran the streets religiously in this town, and I agreed with her on that. She told me she would have never known I had any of the issues I just discussed.

After this remark was made I immediately felt a strong emotion come over me, and I started opening up about everything. I told them that I ran so often, had

more each and every day! But, I also let them know that my obsession with all my activities was probably due to the brain injury I received. They all sat in amazement and listened to me go on and on as I described some of my running adventures and the awesome people I have connected with.

Then the question of Post-Traumatic Stress came up from one of the teachers, and I felt another strong emotion come to me on that subject. I felt my voice start to shake as I began to speak.

I took a deep breath and said, "I was so young when my injury happened. When I finally got out of that hospital I was like every other adolescent. I wanted to be normal and fun, no different, so what did I do? I picked it up and carried on with my life like I was normal. Even though I always felt this strong push inside me I never understood. But the day this push began to make sense to me was the day of The Boston Marathon 2013 bombings."

Just hearing those words Boston Marathon excited everyone. They all said, "You were really there?" I said, "Yes, I was there, not running it, but I was there." Their eyes lit up with even more excitement to hear this. I then went on to say I didn't witness any blood or any damage, but I heard and saw some things that I will never forget. I told them, after hearing those bombs and seeing those faces filled with horror. I traveled back home to Georgia only to revisit my past over and over in my mind. Through nightmares, visions, and then going into a deep depression. This was the post-traumatic stress I never went through as a child after I had my injuries. They all sat in even more amazement. Then I said I used my running to help me get out of that dark hole. Since I made it out of that year alive, I have recommended running as therapy and medicine to everyone I meet, not only for your well-being, but also for your soul.

I told them that this was not the last time I saw the face of post-traumatic stress. I told them of another time a few months after the bombing. I had a photo shoot with a tennis wear company in Atlanta. I was high on life, ego a mile wide, and I



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met a child sitting in a car seat with a brain injury. He looked just as I remember myself in a memory I have so often from those days when I sat in my wheelchair. This baby was only 8 years old, and looking at him was as if I had taken a leap back in time to 1993. I was looking directly at myself.

The speech ended, and I made the drive back home letting my mind drift away into thoughts of all I had spoken of that day. All I could do was smile with a grateful heart because I remembered a time when speaking on this subject frightened me so much I could hardly move. The memories I was recapturing had stifled me for so many years of my life, and I never knew speaking and sharing it was not only helping me grow, but it was also helping other people understand this frightening misunderstood illness. I always knew I had this powerful message. I always felt my push, always.

I can confidently share a big lesson I have learned about life: The bravest thing anyone can do is to have the courage to step away from "normal" and be exactly who you are. It has taken me many, many years to discover that the desire to be heard has to become stronger and more powerful than any fear you have of being different!

Never Give Up, Never Give In, Never Stop Trying, Never Ever Give Up!!!!

All the talk over the past few months has been on depression and mental illness, especially with the release of the Concussion movie and the suicide of several athletes around the world. When I heard the news of these athletes taking their own lives, most of which were due to depression, my heart sank. I could hardly believe as vivacious as they always seemed, they would have depression; but then brain injury was involved in each case. This all resonates so deeply with my soul because I have experienced my fair share of depression from a brain injury growing up. My own experience with brain health and mental health is what lead me to take the next step in my



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all this ambition to run these marathons, lift all this weight and stay as active as possible because I remembered not being able to do any of this. And I remember the words, "you will be in a wheelchair the rest of your life." Those words drove me

life. That step was creating a brain trauma organization to help bring more awareness of this to our world. But this step was only taken because I have lived with brain injury most of my life.

I was asked to do a speech a few days ago on brain injury and brain health at an elementary