

Brain injury survivor helps others cope

By: E'LOUISE ONDASH - For the North County Times

Here is what Heidi Lerner of Encinitas wants you to know about people who suffer brain injuries: Survivors do not lose their intelligence, but their brain functions "get all tied up in knots. The information processing is slowed," explained Lerner, a head injury survivor. "They may have trouble with communication and may seem confused, but they know exactly what they want to say. They understand perfectly but can't respond adequately, so they usually are misunderstood."

Seventeen years ago this week, Lerner lay in a coma with severe head injuries following a car accident in Mississippi. She had been traveling cross-country from California to Florida, where she was living at the time. When she awoke, Lerner had her work cut out for her. Like the other 5.3 million Americans living with disabilities caused by traumatic brain injuries, she had to deal with memory and attention problems, anger management and impulsiveness, for starters.

"I was sensitive to light, had problems recognizing words, organizational difficulties, depression and mood swings," said Lerner, 42. "I had trouble initiating things and got overwhelmed easily. I became apathetic and tired easily. When you ask me how long it took to recover, that assumes that I went back to how I was before, but my whole world changed. I came out a different person."

Despite the litany of obstacles, Lerner returned to school six years after her accident to learn how "to help others with brain injuries to become more independent.

"The thing that helped me the most in my recovery was putting myself through school," she said. "I call this academic rehabilitation. Putting myself through the act of studying, besides the course work, is how I learned what is needed to help a brain injury survivor academically."

Lerner persisted and earned a master's degree in special education specifically for brain-injury survivors. She is greatly needed because the numbers continue to grow.

"These days, brain injury occurs around the world in quite a variety of circumstances ---- sports events, motor vehicle accidents, terrorist attacks and war," Lerner said.

According to the International Brain Injury Association, head injury is the leading cause of death and disability worldwide. Twenty percent to 30 percent of the soldiers returning from Iraq have traumatic brain injuries. In all, more than 2 percent of this country's population is living with the consequences of brain injury.

Today, Lerner leads a brain-injury support group at Scripps Hospital in Encinitas. To further the understanding of people with brain injuries, Lerner has written a book of poetry. Called "Gray Matters ---- Brain Injury: The Inside Perspective," that offers "an introspective and sometimes humorous view of what it is like to suffer a near-fatal blow to the head and live with its complications."

In a nutshell, she added, "it is unfair, unreasonable and disrespectful to determine for a survivor what he or she is capable of. It is up to that individual. Motivation and self-determination can work miracles."

For more information about the support group which meets monthly on the third Thursday at the Del Mar Library. *Gray Matters* can be ordered on Lerner's Website: www.graymatters4u.com.