

# Encinitas woman turns her injury into inspiration

ENCINITAS — Heidi Lerner wants you to know this about people who suffer brain injuries: Survivors do not lose their intelligence, but their brains do function differently than those of uninjured people.

"Our brains get all tied up in knots," explained Lerner, a head-injury survivor.

"Information processing is slowed, and we may have trouble with communication and seem confused. But we know exactly what we want to say. We understand perfectly but can't respond adequately, so we are usually misunderstood."

Lerner, an Encinitas resi-

dent, is doing her best to educate the public about people who struggle to lead as normal lives as possible after severe head trauma.

Survival numbers are increasing because doctors and technology can now save those who otherwise would have died as a result of serious trauma or stroke. But when these victims wake up, they face new lives with many challenges. That's what happened to Lerner 17 years ago.

Lerner was in a car accident and lay in a coma for weeks. When she awoke, she was one of the 5.3 million Americans living with disabilities because of a head injury. She had to deal with memory and attention problems, anger management issues, and impulsive behavior. She also was sensitive to light, had problems recognizing words, couldn't get organized and suffered from depression and mood swings.

"I had trouble initiating things and I got overwhelmed easily," explained 43-year-old Lerner. "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



Heidi Lerner

whole world had changed."

Despite a litany of obstacles, Lerner returned to school six years after her accident. With persistence, she earned a master's degree in special education for brain-injury survivors.

"I want to help others with brain injuries to become more independent" she said.

Putting herself through school helped her recovery, and Lerner started a support group for others with brain injuries.

Tom Snider of Carlsbad attends the monthly meetings at Scripps Hospital Encinitas.

Eight years ago, at age 47, Snider suffered two brain aneurysms — weaknesses in the walls of the vessels that can rupture and impair brain functioning.

"My main problem now is short-term memory," said the former professional photographer. "The other is the isolation, but meeting people with the same problems at the meetings helps quite a bit. Heidi does a great job of organizing it."

Dorothy Cunningham of Vista, a friend of Lerner's for four years, finds her accomplishments amazing.

"Heidi has had to struggle twice as hard as anyone else to achieve her goals," Cunningham said. "And because she does so, she's an authority and a heroine for other brain-injury patients."

The need for people with Lerner's skills continues to grow. According to the International Brain Injury

Association, head injury is the leading cause of death and disability worldwide, 20 to 30 percent of the soldiers returning from Iraq have traumatic brain injuries, and more than 2 percent of Americans live with the consequences of brain injury.

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

Lerner also has written a book of poetry to help others understand what having a brain injury is like. Called "Gray Matters — Brain Injury: The Inside Perspective," the book 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."

"It is unfair, unreasonable and disrespectful to determine for a survivor what he or she is capable of," Lerner said. "Motivation and self-determination can work miracles."

Lerner's support group meets monthly on the first Thursday at Scripps Hospital Encinitas, and Lerner is interested in speaking to community groups about brain injury. For more information, email Heidi at: [heidi@graymatters4u.com](mailto:heidi@graymatters4u.com). "Gray Matters" can be ordered on Lerner's Web site: [www.graymatters4u.com](http://www.graymatters4u.com).