

One man's journey: living with a brain injury

COBOURG STAR

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Gary Scott was a self-proclaimed workaholic. The Colborne resident loved his job at Esco Ltd. in Port Hope, where he worked as machinist supervisor.

At 51, he started the job right out of high school and worked his way up in the plant — he was still there nearly 33 years later. He often worked 12-hour days, and as his wife Connie described it: "Gary's job was his passion — he absolutely loved doing it."

But that all came to abrupt end on July 28, 2001, when Gary was rear-ended on his motorcycle by a speeding car on Highway 401.

When he left that morning at 5:30 a. m. for work, it never occurred to him that it would be the last time he would ride his beloved Harley and head to a job he was so passionate about.

When the speeding car hit him from behind, he flew off his bike, was thrown into the windshield of the car and came off it to land on the highway.

His injuries were so severe that when he arrived at Cobourg hospital and an air ambulance came to transport him, another severely injured man (in an unrelated accident) got first priority. Hospital workers thought Scott wouldn't endure the trip.

But when the air ambulance did come back and pick him up, airlifting him to Sunnybrook hospital in Toronto, he did survive. But with a catastrophic brain injury, his life would never be the same.

Several surgeries followed, including surgery to repair his injured leg and brain surgery to remove crushed bone fragments and allow for the swelling.

Gary said remembers nothing from the accident nor the first few weeks that followed. He spent two weeks at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto before being transported to Providence Continuing Care Hospital in Kingston for rehabilitation. He was released just before Christmas, five months after the accident.

But when he came home, his words were completely scrambled. Speech and language pathologist Mary Ellen Thompson, who has been working with Gary since he came home, said he couldn't even say his wife's or two daughters' names.

With the help of her and rehabilitation assistant Laura Dann, he has had to relearn all the skills he had as a child — including reading and talking.

June is Brain Injury Awareness Month. Gary and Connie shared their story in an



PHOTO BY LINDA O'CONNOR

Gary Scott of Colborne is flanked by his wife Connie (left), and speech pathologist Mary Ellen Thompson. Following a traumatic brain injury in 2001, Gary and Connie have had their lives turned upside down.

interview recently to help people understand the lives of families living with brain injuries.

Connie said unlike most people, Gary has to work on speaking and reading daily.

"He has to constantly reinforce his skills. If he doesn't keep on practicing, he'll lose them. Vocabulary and reading skills have to be constantly exercised."

Even seven years later, the rehabilitation assistant comes one a week to make sure he is keeping on task. She also wants to make sure he has projects and plans.

"Depression is a huge risk," explained Thompson, "and you can lose so much ground if you become depressed."

Gary has faced many hurdles since the accident and his own demons.

The first came three years after the accident when he went to the company he worked for to get his job back.

"I knew I'd never go back as a team leader but I thought I'd go back as a machinist," said Gary, who still struggles for many of his words.

"It was a big discouragement for me when they told me I couldn't."

His wife said she didn't expect him to ever work again, "but I knew it would be an awful shock to him when he found out."

The second shock came when he tried to

get his driver's licence 18 months ago. As a result of the accident, he had lost 25 per cent of his peripheral vision and was told "I'd never drive again for the rest of my life."

Connie said none of them were expecting this: "He felt like he'd lost all his independence."

Luckily, his optometrist called a year ago to tell him the law had changed for people with peripheral vision loss and four centres in Ontario now test people and judge them on an individual basis. If he could successfully operate a vehicle with the disability, he could get his licence.

After a trip to Barrie to take the test and three driving lessons, Gary was able to drive again — which was a huge boon for both he and his wife.

Connie said it was hard for him to get used to going out on his own.

"When he first got his licence back, I had to talk him into going out by himself."

He still keeps to places he is familiar with. But he has been able to return to his love for buying and restoring antiques and has a heated garage to do his work at his home.

Keeping busy with a plan for each day of the week is critical, said Thompson, because the risk of depression is always there. Gary had one particular winter since the accident where he could barely get out of bed because of despondency.

Unfortunately, Gary will never be able to drive his motorcycle again — he was told he would never get that licence back because of his injuries.

worked with him constantly on it." The hard work paid off. "He did a great job," said his wife.

Connie said living with someone who has a brain injury can be quite stressful and difficult. Having the therapists coming in regularly offer her a break and a chance to talk to someone about all the frustrations.

"We have worked as a team." For a woman whose husband was always working and did many things on her own, it was a huge adjustment for her as well.

"He became so dependent on me," she said. "Even now it feels like I'm more of a caregiver than a wife."

For a long time after his accident, she couldn't plan anything away from him.

"As a wife of a workaholic, we'd lived independent lives before. All of a sudden, we were together 24/7."

"If it wasn't for our church and faith, we wouldn't have survived it," said Connie.

Although they still have tough times, like all couples, they have worked through it, said his wife.

One of the biggest challenges for families living with brain injuries is the loss of connections with others, said Thompson.

"You have a lot of friends at first (after the accident) but then it becomes hard being middle-aged at home. The same friendship circle isn't there any more."

"You definitely find out who your friends are," added Connie.

Connie did join a caregivers' support group which started in 2004. She said there was nothing like that when the accident happened.

"It was hard because you felt like it was all about the person yet he wasn't the only one being affected."

She has since become involved in the formation of a mentor's group to help others just starting the brain injuries' journey.

"People who've been at it a while help someone new through telephone support."

Pam Ferrill, office administrator for the Brain Injury Association, Quinte District, described how difficult it can be to live with a brain injury.

"One of our members came to the office and stated, 'I wish my arm got cut off in the accident and then people would know what was wrong with me.'"

People who suffer from a brain injury usually look the same and people and family members don't understand the issues they are dealing with, including fatigue, memory loss and irritability, she added.

Ironically, a few days following this interview, Gary landed back in the hospital in the intensive care as a result of a seizure, something he has been prone to since his accident. It shows how vulnerable a person is after a head injury.

Thompson, who has been in touch with the couple since the seizure, said Gary is

One of his biggest accomplishments was being able to give the father-of-the-bride speech at his daughter's wedding four years after the accident. "We practiced it for about six months," said Ms. Thompson, with a smile. "We

home now recovering from the ordeal. "Connie just wants people to realize that it is never over and you are never free of the injury. Your life is changed forever."

June is Brain Injuries Awareness month.