U-T San Diego

A class for second chances

Brain-injured people get lives back through college program

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David Ramirez meticulously records his every action in a day planner: what he eats for breakfast, when he uses the restroom, who he speaks with.

Without the log, he'd forget it all.

JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
David Ramirez, 34, suffered brain damage that has left him unable to recall anything he does. With the help of a local community college program for brain-injured people, he has learned to write down his actions to remember them.

Ramirez, 34, suffered a heart attack nearly 12 years ago that deprived his brain of oxygen for more than two minutes. It crippled his sense of balance. It robbed him of his fondness for jokes and love of reggae music.

Worst of all, the brain damage wiped out his ability to remember anything he does.

With the help of his parents and siblings, Ramirez relearned how to bathe, brush his teeth and feed himself. Then he heard about a program offered by the San Diego Community College District that helps brain-injured people learn to live more independently.

Multimedia

Rewiring their brains: Community college program aids those with brain injuries.

For the 266 students enrolled in the Acquired Brain Injury Program, it's more than a set of free classes. Students bond over shared experiences – their breakthroughs in learning to speak again, frustrations with insensitive doctors, and sadness over family and friends who give up on them. They explore their new identities together, and take courses in everything from brain anatomy and stress management to sexuality and assertiveness.

“If I didn't have the program, I wouldn't have understood or been able to cope with who I am, or how I manage life now,” said Michelle Heaton, a former pediatric nurse who was hit by a drunken driver seven years ago. “It's so wonderful to be with people who understand you no matter what.”

JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
David Ramirez is one of 266 students enrolled in the Acquired Brain Injury Program, which has helped him

The program, the largest in the state offered by a community college district, is expecting a surge in demand. More than 10 percent of the 1.4 million U.S. troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan may have been exposed to bomb blasts and suffered at least mildly traumatic brain injuries, according to Pentagon research.

Local community college officials are among a handful in California working to set up courses for active-duty service members who have brain injuries.

Doctors and brain-injury advocates say the program is vital in an age of diminishing health care coverage.

“These sorts of services are absolutely important,” said Michael Kilmer, a case manager for the VA Medical Center in La Jolla. “The

services available are very limited locally. We're working on establishing some now."

learn to navigate the public transportation system from his home in National City to program sites in Point Loma and Linda Vista.

A slow recovery

Ramirez was 23 when he had the first of two heart attacks. The shipyard welder had recently married and was awaiting the birth of his first child.

Then, early one December morning, Ramirez began gasping for air as he lay in bed, family members said. His eyes rolled back in his head. Paramedics tried again and again before they were able to get his heart beating.

A doctor told Ramirez's family that if he regained consciousness, he probably would be a "vegetable" because his brain had been deprived of oxygen for so long.

Ramirez lay in a coma for 19 days. When he woke up, he didn't recognize his family. He appeared lost in a daze.

Even after he returned home, the once-confident and fun-loving man had turned quiet and pensive. Ramirez quickly learned again to walk and talk, but his memory never returned. Instead of telling jokes, he asked repetitive questions.

Minutes after eating, he'd ask when he last ate. Seconds after leaving a store, he'd ask where he'd been.

That's when Ramirez followed his doctor's suggestion and enrolled in the community college program.

The San Diego district's brain-injury program was created in the summer of 1983 with about a dozen students. The program was a response to student demand and state legislation passed in 1976 that required community colleges to provide programs for disabled students.

To make it more accessible, San Diego community college officials set up the program through its Continuing Education division, which offers hundreds of free courses in areas deemed important by the state. Enrollment in the program grew steadily as local hospitals became aware of it and referred patients.

Wide range of disabilities

Doctors describe brain injuries as creating a "Swiss-cheese effect," wiping out certain memories and functions, but leaving others.

Most brain-injured people struggle with memory loss, emotional instability or impulsive behavior.

Consider the different disabilities of the students in San Diego's program.

There's the 30-year-old who was stung by a scorpion at age 15 in Mexico and developed a nervous-system infection that makes her tongue virtually immovable. There's the former advertising executive who had a stroke and lost her capacity to recall words, including her native Spanish. There's the former FEMA worker who was attacked with a hammer during a burglary attempt and struggles to pronounce certain words and phrases, such as "Afghanistan" and "House of Representatives."

San Diego's program attempts to address each person's needs through 58 course offerings at three campuses. Students work at their own pace, repeating the noncredit courses whenever they like.

The Acquired Brain Injury Program, established in 1983, offers 58 courses at three campuses for its students, who range in age from teens to grandparents.

PROFILE

Acquired Brain Injury Program

This noncredit, no-fee program is designed to help adults recover from brain injuries

Coordinator: Continuing Education, San Diego Community College District

Established: 1983

Students: 266

Staff: 9 teachers, 3 counselors

Annual budget: $500,000

Class schedule: 18-week semesters begin in September and January; 8-week summer session begins in June

Class locations: Mountain View, Point Loma, Linda Vista

Information and referral: (619) 388-6983

Online: www.sdce.edu/ dsps/ index.php

BRAIN INJURY FACTS

Acquired brain injuries are suffered after birth, and often are the result of strokes, aneurysms or brain infections.

One subset of acquired injuries is traumatic brain injuries, which commonly result from falls, car

The students are diverse by any measure. They range in age from teens to silver-haired grandparents. Former construction workers make friends with college professors, janitors and engineers. Some use wheelchairs; others limp. Some walk with ease. The one thing they have in common is their brain injury.

JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

Ramirez uses a day planner (above) to record what he does, where he goes and whom he sees, such as his 11-year-old daughter, Kassandra, who recently paid him a visit at home.

The teachers, most of whom have been trained in speech pathology, counseling or recreational therapy, try to help students with humor and sensitivity.

JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

"You have to have patience because people are doing the best they can," said Heike Kessler-Heiberg, an instructor at the Mesa College campus. "We recognize the fact that everyone's in the same boat. Everybody is pretty much a disability waiting to happen. Your eyesight, your memory, it's all going to go."

accidents or assaults.

About 1.4 million Americans experience a traumatic brain injury each year. Men are about 1.5 times more likely to suffer a traumatic brain injury. Statistical data on acquired brain injuries are difficult to collect, in part because of their wide range of causes, treatments and prognosis.

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

At the Mountain View site in southeastern San Diego, which enrolls students with the most severe brain injuries, a teacher recently worked with a small group on conversation skills.

"Rose," teacher Linda Schmitz said, addressing an elderly woman in a wheelchair. "Tell me what you've been up to."

Rose Nemeth, 66, who was injured in a car accident, smiled and looked around.

"What did you do yesterday?" Schmitz asked again.

"I." Nemeth paused for several seconds. "Worked."

"You worked," Schmitz said.

"Yes!" Nemeth yelled back, jubilant about getting the word out.

"Where did you work?" Schmitz asked.

"Therapy," Nemeth said, this time quicker.

The 10 students gathered around a large table clapped and cheered at her words.

Each small action – speaking one's name clearly, answering a question, just trying – is encouraged and applauded.

For Ramirez, the program was intimidating at first. His lack of memory left him feeling vulnerable, almost disconnected from himself.

But he stuck with it, and after two years, started speaking up.

A turning point was his reintroduction to using a day planner. Ramirez found that writing down his actions aided his memory. He said it felt as if he'd been given the ability to remember things again. Now he writes in his day planner religiously.

“That book is his life,” said his younger brother, Abraham Ramirez.

Sometimes, though, he resists writing down reminders, much to his family's chagrin.

A few months ago, Ramirez's father, Pedro, asked him to walk to the market several blocks from their home to buy a dozen eggs for breakfast. Three times, Ramirez walked to the market and returned – each time with a newspaper.

“Things like that, it's hard to deal with,” said Abraham Ramirez, who often ends up redoing his brother's errands.

Never misses class

Even while making progress in class, Ramirez struggled with the emotional impact of what had happened to his life. His wife divorced him. He lost his job. He resigned himself to being completely dependent on others.

What has helped sustain him is the support he receives in the classes, which he attends from morning to late afternoon at two campuses.

A few years ago, he took a huge step. The program used donated funds to pay for a therapist to teach him to navigate the public transit system. Ramirez, who had needed family or transportation services to get around, spent months learning to read maps and schedules.

Now he's able to negotiate the roughly 60-minute trip between his National City home and the college district's sites in Point Loma and Linda Vista. He has memorized where to board the trolley and where to transfer to a bus.

Many students, including Ramirez, say they're grateful for the program and the district's investment in it. About $300,000 of the program's annual $500,000 budget comes from the state. The San Diego Community College District provides the rest.

“There has been a huge commitment in our district to support people with disabilities,” said Anne Heller, the associate dean of disability support programs and services for Continuing Education.

The only eligibility requirements are for students to be residents of California and to have suffered their brain injuries after age 13.

The program offers the only free, long-term help in the San Diego area for people with brain injuries, other than a scattering of support groups.

While several hospitals in the region treat those with brain injuries, survivors typically need generous insurance coverage to participate in the rehabilitation programs. Many students in the program say they were referred to it by local doctors once their insurance coverage ran out.

“(The college district's brain-injury) program is a tremendous community resource and a critical one because of diminishing health care resources,” said Dan Gardner, a psychiatrist with offices in San Diego and Solana Beach who has treated hundreds of brain-injured patients.

Thirty years ago, brain-injured patients typically received rehabilitative therapy in the hospital for four to six months, compared with about three weeks today, Gardner said.

It's hard to determine exactly how effective the community college program has been at graduating students and helping them transition to work or volunteering. San Diego district officials say they don't have the resources to track their graduates, though they hope to soon.

The program's nine teachers estimate they keep in touch with about one-quarter of graduates, who are evenly divided among those who work, are now able to volunteer or who have gone on to take regular college classes.

And though many students have enrolled for several years, officials say the program is cost-effective for the state.

“Some people won't be able to return to employment or volunteering,” Kessler-Heiberg said. “But in the long run, by continuing to come to class, it's keeping them from plummeting into a deep depression, or becoming homeless or struggling with (abuse) issues.”

A persistent spirit

Ramirez's mother, Francesca, worries about her son's future. She fears his poor memory might prevent him from ever finding a job, and says his monthly Social Security checks won't be enough to support a family.

And yet she's heartened by his progress. In the past year, he has found a girlfriend, another student in the brain-injury program, and it has boosted his self-esteem and spirit. He spends time with his 11-year-old daughter, Kassandra, buying her clothes or ice cream and playing video games with her.

Family members are continually impressed by his perseverance.

“Every time I've spoken with my brother about his situation, he's never once complained,” Abraham Ramirez said. “I've never heard him once say, 'Why me?' He's amazing.”

At a recent class, teacher Jo-Ann Szabo instructed students to build a sentence beginning with the phrase, “This I believe,” to reflect their values or personal thoughts.

“I believe in God,” one of the students said.

“I believe that most people are good,” a second volunteered.

“I believe in second chances,” Ramirez said, “because I've gotten a second chance in my life since my brain injury. And I've gotten a second chance at relationships, because now I have (a) girlfriend I love and now have new friends.”

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