

# protect your head

By Kim Racette | For BE Your Best

When public figures such as Bob Woodruff suffer a traumatic brain injury, everyone hears about it.

## 'The Other Breakfast Club'

is a documentary about six local people whose stories hadn't been told.



Photo courtesy of the Western Michigan Brain Injury Network

These six young adults have survived traumatic brain injuries and meet regularly to encourage and support each other. From left, they are Dave Tubergen, Amy Tromp, Kelley Syverson, Adora Trostle, Eric Horton and Amber Hora. "The Other Breakfast Club" describes their challenges.

It's the phone call everyone fears, an urgent request for someone to come to the hospital because a loved one has been in a bad car accident.

Back in 2003, Dave Tubergen's family answered that call, and now he is one of six young adults profiled in "The Other Breakfast Club," a documentary filmed on location in Grand Rapids.

Each year, nearly 40,000 traffic crashes in the United States result in traumatic brain injuries. March is Brain Injury Awareness Month, and the Western Michigan Brain Injury Network (WMBIN) had the opportunity to work with the National Road Safety Foundation out of New York to produce "The Other Breakfast Club," a film that shows the potential long-term effects of brain injury.

Three organizations — Spectrum Health Continuing Care, Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital and Hope Network Rehabilitation Services — work together in the Western Michigan Brain Injury Network to provide knowledge, awareness and advocacy about brain injury.

A chance encounter between Road Safety Foundation director/producer Mark Sadan and Kelley Syverson, who in 2002 had suffered a TBI in a car accident, led to the film's production. Visiting her grandfather in New York with her mother, she attended a film lecture and photography exhibit by Sadan, who makes documentaries for the Road Safety Foundation.

"After the lecture my Mom asked him if he might consider making a film about TBI, and I told him about my group," Syverson says.

After several months of communication with the Syversons, Sadan was given the go-ahead

on the project and worked in collaboration with the members of the club, NRSF and the Brain Injury Network.

The club is Tubergen, Syverson, Amy Tromp, Adora Trostle, Eric Horton and Amber Hora, young adults who met in rehabilitation after having been comatose. They tell of their struggles to return to normalcy after their accidents.

The film also features a few of the many health care workers and therapists who helped with recoveries, and various family members who share their memories as well. With a running time of just over 47 minutes, the film shows in graphic terms the terrible human toll from traffic crashes these six experienced, and their long road back to recovery. The film is titled to reflect the group's habit of regularly meeting to encourage and support each other.

Cindy Barrus, director of post acute neuro rehabilitation services at Spectrum Health Continuing Care, says, "This documentary was distributed nationally throughout the public broadcasting system for use around the country, and all state Brain Injury Association affiliates were provided a copy of the film for use in their state brain injury prevention efforts. It is also available for a free download from the National Road Safety Foundation Web site.

"WMBIN has mailed nearly 200 copies of the film to middle and high schools in five West Michigan counties, for use in driver education and health classes."

The young adults featured in the film have also offered to speak to classrooms about the impact of their brain injuries on their lives.

"It was important to me to let people know that this can happen to anyone," says Syverson. "But if it does, life is not over. It may be

**See the film** For a free download in Windows Media of "The Other Breakfast Club" film, visit the Web site at [www.nationalroadsafety.org](http://www.nationalroadsafety.org). For more information, you may call the National Road Safety Foundation toll-free at **866.SAFEPATH** (866.723.3728).



Dave Tubergen



Kelley Syverson

a long hard road back, but it is not the be all end all. TBI is very misunderstood, and anything I could do to create awareness and educate people about it was positive."

Syverson and the others in the documentary share their stories in the hopes of drawing attention to the potential long-term effects of brain injury. All six continue to make improvements in their abilities, Barus says, but don't be fooled — they all still have challenges in mobility, memory and other areas. Only one of the six is able to drive.

**Traumatic brain injury is defined as a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain.**

Of course, not all blows to the head result in a TBI, and the severity can range from mild to extreme. There may be a brief change in mental status or consciousness to an extended period of unconsciousness or amnesia. The injury may be short-term, or can result in long-term problems with independent function.

"Brain injury is one of those injuries that people just don't 'get' ... until it happens to them or someone they love. Car crashes, falls, shaken baby, sledding ac-

cidents, sports injuries, domestic violence ... lots of ways to hurt a brain," Barrus says.

Tubergen agreed to help make this film because it got him "out of the joint for a break, to go get a cup of coffee," but for him it became so much more than that.

"I enjoyed meeting the others, who had been in the same situation as me. They understood what I was going through, because they had been there, too," he explains.

Tubergen says that it was important for him to be a part of something that might help protect others from serious injuries, and a car wreck like his.

"Maybe I can prevent one kid like me from speeding and being a screwball, or show him how in an instant that everything could change. Knowing I made my Mom cry, and that (the ambulance company) had called my Dad while they strapped me into the helicopter and told him to come to the hospital if he wanted to see me before I died, was terrible. If my story can help prevent another family from that kind of shock and trauma, then all my time and effort making 'The Other Breakfast Club' was worth it."

## Leading causes of traumatic brain injury

- Falls (28 percent)
- Motor vehicle and traffic crashes (20 percent)
- Struck by or against events (19 percent)
- Assault (11 percent)

For active duty military personnel in war zones, **blasts** are the leading cause.

The age groups at highest risk are **0-4-year-olds** and **15- to 19-year-olds**.

**AFTERMATH:** TBI can cause a wide range of functional changes that affect thinking, language, learning, emotions, behavior and/or sensation. It can also cause epilepsy and increase the risk for conditions such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, as well as other brain disorders that become more common with age.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [www.biausa.org](http://www.biausa.org), Brain Injury Association of America, 800.444.6443 and [www.biami.org](http://www.biami.org), Brain Injury Association of Michigan, 810.229.5880 or 800.444.6443.

## Don't text and drive

A real key to significantly improving driving safety is keeping your eyes on the road.

In a Virginia Tech Transportation Institute driving study, **truck drivers who were texting on the road increased their risk of crash or nearly crashing by 23 times**. Texting was shown to be much more risky than merely talking on a cell phone.

New drivers are especially at risk, but many teens choose to text and drive anyway, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

After surveying 800 teens in four U.S. cities, Pew estimates that **26 percent of all American teens 16-17 have texted while driving**.

The research also indicates that children might be picking up the dangerous behavior from their parents. The report states that, "the frequency of teens reporting parent cell phone use behind the wheel in our focus groups was striking, and suggested that, **in many cases, texting while driving is a family affair.**"