

Survive and Thrive

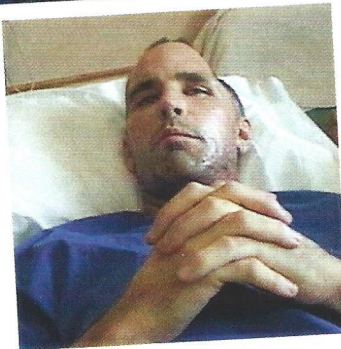
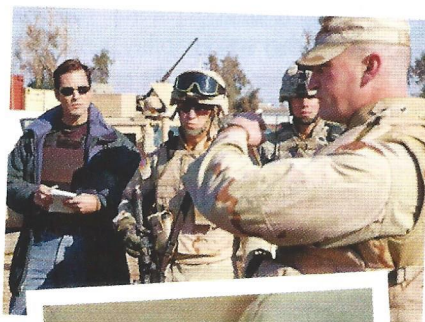
Bob Woodruff received the best care and attention after a traumatic brain injury (TBI)—and made a remarkable recovery. Today, his foundation tries to ensure the same outcome for other TBI survivors.

BY GINA ROBERTS-GREY

The details of his story are well-known. On January 29, 2006, Bob Woodruff, a television correspondent for ABC News, was embedded with the United States 4th Infantry Division near Taji, Iraq, to report on US and Iraqi security forces. Clad in helmets and body armor while traveling in an armored vehicle, he and an ABC cameraman stood with their heads above the vehicle's hatch to capture footage for a special report they were working on.

Just 27 days earlier, Bob had been named to succeed Peter Jennings as co-anchor of *ABC World News Tonight*, capping a successful 17-year career as a journalist, covering the death of Pope John Paul II and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, among other events. He and his wife, Lee, a novelist and contributing reporter to *CBS This Morning*, had four young children and lived busy, high-powered lives.

That all changed when Bob's vehicle hit a roadside bomb. In the explosion of rocks and metal, Bob was critically injured, sustaining shrapnel wounds to the head. Within hours, he was rushed to surgery at an Air Force hospital in Iraq, where he underwent a craniectomy to relieve pressure in his brain. The procedure involves removing part of the skull to allow a swelling brain to expand without being squeezed, explains Gregory O'Shanick, MD, president and medical director of the



GAME-CHANGER Bob Woodruff (top, left) just two hours before his convoy hit a roadside bomb in Taji, Iraq, which left him in a coma for 40 days, and (bottom) recovering at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Center for Neurorehabilitation Services in Richmond, VA, and national medical director emeritus of the Brain Injury Association of America.

From there, Bob was evacuated to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. He woke up five weeks later in a room at the Bethesda Naval Hospital in Bethesda, MD. "I was in a medically induced coma for five weeks to help my brain heal," says Bob. Meanwhile, Lee maintained a vigil at his bedside. "She didn't know if I'd wake up, or what I'd be like if I did. I think she had a much tougher job waiting than I did of fighting to stay alive."

In an instant, Bob joined the ranks of the estimated 1.7 million Americans who sustain a traumatic brain injury (TBI) each year, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That same instant also changed Lee's life. "Rarely a day passes that I don't think about it," she says.

TRAUMA TO THE HEAD

Usually a result of blunt-force trauma (concussion, a blow to the head, or a hard fall) or an acceleration/deceleration event (such as whiplash), a TBI can cause immediate symptoms such as disorientation, confusion, memory loss, and loss of consciousness, says Dr. O'Shanick. A TBI can also occur without loss of consciousness, he says,

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—LEE WOODRUFF

UNITED FRONT Lee and Bob Woodruff 10 years after Bob’s accident.

and longer-term consequences can include sensory or cognitive difficulties, behavioral changes such as impulsivity or disinhibition, and vision problems such as light sensitivity, impaired depth perception, or reduced visuospatial perception. “Severity can vary from a full recovery to one that results in death.”

Bob’s TBI was so extreme it nearly killed him—and luck played an important role in his survival, he says. “The slightest shift in the location of my injury just one centimeter left or right would have made a huge difference. I was also lucky to receive the highest level of acute care.”

INNOVATIVE TREATMENT

Part of Bob’s acute care was the craniectomy few surgeons outside of the US military were using at the time. “That procedure was novel at the time of Bob Woodruff’s injury,” says Jack Tsao, MD, DPhil, FAAN, associate professor at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, MD, and director

of traumatic brain injury programs for the US Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. “Military surgeons made big advancements in getting people like Bob back to good functioning.”

And those advances are largely responsible for revolutionizing the way doctors assess patients with TBI. “Bob’s recovery wasn’t unique among military personnel treated for TBIs,” says Dr. Tsao, who worked at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center while Bob was there receiving treatment. “We saw service members who had a grim prognosis because of brain scans that showed a lot of damage walk out of the hospital on their own.”

And it’s not just service members who benefit, says Lee. “The efforts of the military medics, nurses, and doctors saved not only Bob’s life, but left our whole family standing as well,” she says.

WAKING UP TO A NEW LIFE

Despite his luck, the “traumatic” part of Bob’s injury manifested itself well after the explosion in Iraq. “There was such happiness when

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I woke up after nearly being killed,” he says. “Then I realized I wasn’t going to be the same and that, for me, was the traumatic part. It meant this injury could impact me—and my family—for the rest of my life.”

Still, his survival and recovery were miraculous. “No one expected me to wake up in the shape I did,” he admits. Again, luck played a role. “Because he received the right therapy at the right time and with the right intensity for him, Bob was able to take advantage of the brain’s ability to relearn, to evolve and return to normalcy,” says Dr. O’Shanick.

Bob’s recovery, including the ability to walk again, relearn several languages, and return to life as a husband and father and then a news journalist a little more than a year after his injury, became a beacon of hope for many TBI survivors and their families. But it hasn’t been without bumps, and 10 years down the road challenges remain. “I still have major problems with aphasia that leave me struggling to find or use the right word because the left lobe of my brain was blasted,” says Bob. But his outcome is much better than predicted. “Lee was told I’d probably never be able to communicate, but when I woke up, I started talking,” he recalls.

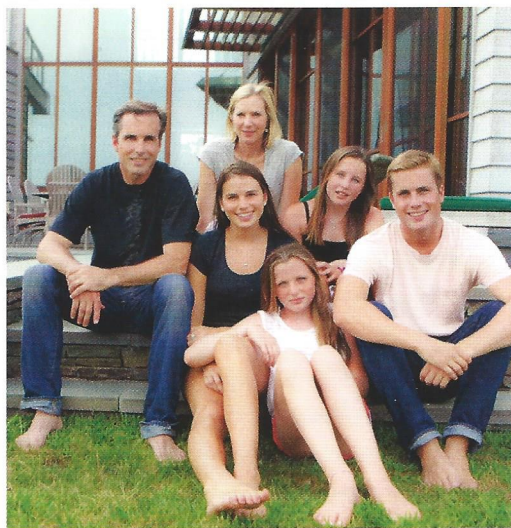
“The left side of the brain is dominant for language in most people, and this type of injury can result in difficulty speaking as well as listening, reading, and writing,” explains Dr. O’Shanick. “However, Bob and his progress are proof of what is possible with timely, comprehensive neurorehabilitation.”

A DIFFERENT FOCUS

Soon after his recovery, Bob used his investigative skills to learn more about the type of injury he sustained. The more he researched, the more he was interested in how TBI affects those in the military—and how he and Lee could help. Based on their own experience, the Woodruffs knew how important quality medical care and strong social support were to recovery, and they wanted to offer that to injured soldiers and their families.

GRASSROOTS SUPPORT

That desire led to the launch of the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BobWoodruffFoundation.org). Established in 2006 by Bob, Lee, and Bob’s brothers, its mission, Bob says, “is to ensure any service person with a TBI, or any injury, receives the same care and sup-



FAMILY TIES Bob and Lee Woodruff with their children (left to right) Cathryn, Nora, Claire, and Mack.

port that I did.” The Woodruffs recognize that Bob had an employer willing to keep him on the payroll and family and friends who were able to visit regularly. “Some TBI patients have supportive families or employers, but many don’t,” says Bob. “My own family said, ‘Let’s not let this continue to happen.’”

Lee says she was inspired to give back because of Bob’s own attitude. “I am so proud of not only his lack of a ‘why me’ attitude, but also for his passion to turn our family’s tragedy into an outlet that helps injured service members and their families.”

Since September 11, 2001, more than 2.8 million US troops have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq.

More than 328,000 have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injury, according to the US Department of Defense.

To help those troops and their families, the Bob Woodruff Foundation awards grants to programs in communities where veterans, their families, and caregivers live and work. It also collaborates with the US Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration to provide access to the type of long-term help Bob and his family received.

“One of our most important messages is that we’re here for the family and caregivers; they rarely get attention for how the injury affects their lives,” says Bob. “Like the loved ones of many veterans, Lee set aside her career and life to take care of me. She had to be nurse, advocate, wife, mother, friend, and mom and dad to our kids. She had to do it all and keep herself together in the process.” The Woodruffs know how daunting that can be so they ensure their foundation provides resource to help other families keep it all together.

FOSTERING HOPE

After the initial event, many TBI symptoms aren’t visible to a stranger’s glance, says Bob. “As tragic and traumatic as amputation, burns, and even a shattered skull like mine are, they can be seen.”

By contrast, TBI symptoms may be visible only to close family members. “Little things like trouble finding a word or forgetting how to do something that seems ordinary, along with bigger ones, may be seen only by a partner in the bedroom, a child looking at his parent from the soccer field, in the family kitchen, or in the patient’s hospital room,” says Bob. “Those who see these ‘symptoms’ are, in a way, the ultimate injured parties.”

Through their foundation, the Woodruffs try to restore purpose and mission to fractured lives—whether through helping veterans find a job or a volunteer opportunity or an outlet for their hobbies or offering support to overwhelmed spouses.

AN UNEXPECTED BONUS

Like so many TBI survivors and their families, the Woodruffs' lives are not the ones they planned, but the foundation has been a rewarding consequence of Bob's injury. "Lee and I have such a commitment and belief that we can help others with TBI in the military. And if I had to get injured to spark that, I wouldn't dream of trading what happened to me."

Bob continues to pursue news stories around the world and Lee continues to write, but the foundation remains close to their hearts. "This is the most satisfying career-related thing I've done in my life or anything I could do in the future," Bob says. "It's worth the years of frustration and depression I have—and anyone else who has gone through this has—had to deal with."

A CALL TO ACTION

You don't have to be a TBI survivor to help a service member or his or her family, say the Woodruffs. The first step is to support or volunteer for organizations that help injured soldiers. Then act like you're helping your own loved one.

"If your child, parent, or spouse had a TBI, you would move heaven and earth to find organizations that would care for them the way you want them cared for," says Bob. "Participating in a larger effort ensures long-term support for all involved."

HELP FOR HEROES The Woodruffs at the 2014 Stand Up for Heroes benefit for their foundation with Marine Captain Derek Herrera and his wife, Maura.

Recognizing a Leader

The American Brain Foundation established the Public Leadership in Neurology Award (PLINA) to honor individuals outside the medical profession who have advanced public awareness of neurologic disease, been effective advocates for neuroscience research, or have made significant contributions to improving patient care.

Past recipients include former United States Vice President Walter Mondale for his commitment to brain research, Michael J. Fox for his efforts to find better treatments for Parkinson's disease, and Julie Andrews for her passion for furthering awareness of Huntington's disease.

This year's PLINA recipient, Bob Woodruff, is recognized for his deep interest in helping veterans with traumatic brain injuries and other wounds through the Bob Woodruff Foundation, the organization he and his wife, Lee, an author, established after Bob was injured in a roadside bomb in Iraq in 2006.

Through Lee's appearances and writing—she and Bob co-wrote *In An Instant* (Random House, 2007), a book about their family's experience dealing with and recovering from Bob's devastating injury—she has helped put a face on the serious issue of traumatic brain injury and its life-changing effects.

Lee will accept the award on Tuesday, April 19, at the awards luncheon at the American Academy of Neurology's Annual Meeting in Vancouver, BC, Canada, on behalf of her husband, who will be out of the country. Bob says he "is so honored to receive the award."

SPREADING THE WORD

By speaking about their experiences and through the work of their foundation, the Woodruffs hope to raise awareness about the prevalence of traumatic brain injury. "I wish people knew how widespread TBI is and that it can happen to anyone they love at any time as a result of a car accident, falling off a swing or bike, or playing sports," says Bob.

"Lee and I want society to care about people with traumatic brain injury and their family members with the same zeal, level of support, and desire for scientific advancements as we do cancer," he says. "Everybody knows what cancer is. They know a diagnosis can come from nowhere in the blink of an eye. That same thinking should apply to TBI."

With more work, Bob says, there will be more research and breakthroughs, and more people will experience their own remarkable recoveries.

"As a person living with TBI, I know it gets better. Lee knows it gets better for the spouse or caregiver," he says. "To this day, I still improve. There's hope out there, and we won't stop trying to provide it to those living with traumatic brain injury." NN

WEB EXTRA: For more information about the Bob Woodruff Foundation, visit bit.ly/NN-Foundation411.

