

Meet Chris Wilber - A Client Living Semi-Independently

By Heidi Reyst, Ph.D., CBIS-CE

Chris Wilber is a young man doing what many young men his age are doing - working hard to make ends meet. He is also a young man who, despite incurring a brain injury at a relatively young age, is not only learning how to become independent, he is demonstrating many aspects of independence. And, despite being told that his skills lie in the janitorial field - and not in woodworking where he wanted to work, he currently works in the field he desires.

Chris was injured in a single vehicle accident in November of 1997 at the age of 18, in his home town of Ontonagon in the Upper Peninsula. He is not shy about speaking of the accident - not because he is proud of how he was injured - but because he feels that talking about it may help others. On the night of his accident, Chris and 3 of his friends went out drinking. They also went driving, and when Chris and the driver of the vehicle tried to regain control of the vehicle after going around a corner at too high of a speed, the car flipped 4-5 times, injuring the occupants. Chris, who was not wearing a seat belt, was injured badly and taken emergently to Marquette General Hospital, where he remained in a coma with a frontal lobe injury.

At Marquette General, Chris completed his acute care rehabilitation. In January, just a few months after his accident, he returned to high school. But he found that returning to school so quickly after his accident was difficult, and by Easter break Chris and his family were touring rehabilitation programs in the Lower Peninsula. The Wilbers chose Rainbow, and in June of 1998, Chris was admitted to Gill House and then to Highmeadow House, the young adult home in the Child and Adolescent Program. Chris was enrolled in school and attended Harrison High School in the Farmington School District. He participated in Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech and Language Pathology and Recreational Therapy. He quickly made gains, graduated from Harrison, and was soon ready for the next step - Semi Independent Living.

Chris, along with another client, was the first to begin the Oakland County Townhouse Program in the fall of 1999. This program was started specifically for young adult clients ready to begin the process of learning to live independently, with their similarly aged peers. Chris did well in this setting, and was soon ready for transfer to the Ann Arbor Semi-Independent Program to continue working on his goals towards independence. There, he participated in groups, which focused on brain injury education, community

skills, deficit awareness, social skills, independent living skills and learning instrumental activities of daily living. Chris continued to make gains and eventually moved through the program from Level I to Level IV. He had graduated from the groups, and began to focus on vocational endeavors.



Chris Wilber

Chris had participated in a vocational school in Plainwell, Michigan. Through testing he was told that his skill set was in the area of janitorial work. Chris was disheartened by this news, as he wanted to work in the field of woodworking. And, despite his move through the levels of the apartments, Chris was feeling extremely homesick. His family, including his mother, father, and siblings, all lived in the Upper Peninsula. Not a short bus trip for Chris, who was able to travel Northward to visit his family occasionally, especially during hunting season. Chris admits that being "so far from family was rough." He stayed in the program and tried a stint at a woodworking job, but that work was tough. Chris felt that it was time to go home, and in November of 2001 he moved home to Ontonagon.

In Ontonagon, there is one main industry - the paper mill. If you don't work in the paper mill, chances are you don't have a job. So, despite moving up North, and living independently, he was unable to secure employment in a market with existing high levels of unemployment. So, in August 2002, Chris returned to the Ann Arbor program at a Level III standing. Chris was soon ready for Level IV where he resided in an apartment rented by Rainbow, with support services provided. He started work at Littlefield and Sons, a woodworking company in Dexter, Michigan. He had secured employment in the field in which he wished to work, and was doing well! Part of his Level IV programming includes paying 15% of his gross income toward rent and maintaining payment of specific utility bills on his own. A task Chris completes routinely.

Anne Ulrich, Chris' OT and Vocational Specialist who worked with Chris before and after his move

home, noted that “Chris really gained a lot of insight when he moved home. He understands what working hard means, and the value of being financially responsible. He initiates paying his rent and bills, and is incredibly conscientious of finances. In fact, he has set up an IRA, purchased stock, and he consults with a financial advisor. He has matured in-

credibly in this area. Not being able to find work was hard for Chris. But he came back and worked to get a job in his field of choice, and is working toward being financially independent. He down plays his job, but he wanted more for himself, and he is succeeding. “

When asked about the effects that brain injury has had on him, Chris’ answer is somewhat surprising. “I really do think it is for the better. I would probably be up North doing the same things I did before my accident. If I had to choose, I’d be up there, but I work hard - kind of a blue collar guy. I learned the hard way.” The weight of that is not lost on Chris. Recently, along with a couple of other clients from the Apartment Program, Chris began speaking to high school kids about his brain injury and life with brain injury. His message is simple. “Drink responsibly. I didn’t think it could happen to me. It did happen to me - and I am here to tell them it can happen to them.” Chris’ reason for speaking is simple as well “If I can help one other kid think twice before drinking and driving, it was all worth it.” §



Chris and Anne Ulrich, OTR

Rainbow Clients Speak at Local High Schools

By Jaime Valone and Chris Wilber

On the morning of May 15, 2004 two apartment residents, Jaime and Chris visited the Gabriel Richard School to talk to juniors and seniors about the dangers associated with using alcohol and other drugs. A similar presentation was made by these two residents at Saline High School. Apartment team members Kathy Roth, Matt Ban, and Colin King were on hand to give support to Chris and Jaime. Chris spoke to the students about his experiences with drinking and driving. He recounted driving with a friend in his mother’s car under the influence of alcohol. Taking it a step too far, he attempted to grab the steering wheel while the car was in motion and unfortunately, the car ran off the road and hit a tree. This resulted in Chris suffering a traumatic brain injury. As a result of his injury, Chris told the class that his life has never been the same. He has had to undergo extensive surgery, physical, speech, and occupational therapy. However, Chris was pleased with the progress he has made thus far in the apartment program. He is now community employed, lives independently in his own apartment, and enjoys a social life. The students were encouraged by Chris not to drink and drive.

Jaime gave a very emotional and heart stirring presentation on the dangers associated with drinking and driving. She spoke about how a drunk driver who was driving on the wrong side of the road, plowed into them at a very high speed. Her entire family was injured in this accident. Jaime’s injury was life threatening to the point where a code was called on her several times. Amazingly, she survived. Today Jaime has numerous challenges however; she feels that she is taking every opportunity to make the best of her life. She has been able to do some volunteer work, lives in her own apartment with minimal support and has demonstrated leadership skills in her therapeutic groups. Jaime feels strongly that she has been helped by the apartment program. And both Chris and Jaime hope to help others by advocating against drinking and driving. §