

**TBI SURVIVOR...**

## Yaseni Caballero-Amaya

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Yaseni Caballero-Amaya is a 38-year-old Honduran-American who immigrated to the United States in 1988. One of seven children, Yaseni became a US Citizen in 1996, of which she is very proud. Even now, when she hears the Star Spangled Banner, she puts her hand to her chest.

Yaseni was married for four years in the early 1990s, which brought her to the Detroit area. She worked at Diamond Electric where she tested electrical coils and met her boyfriend and fiance - Scott Ferguson. Before the accident, Yaseni had completed her sophomore year at Monroe Community College majoring in Elementary Education. Her goal was to teach at an elementary school.

On January 11, 2005, Yaseni sustained a traumatic brain injury in a motor vehicle accident while driving on a snow-covered highway. She was on her way to work, and her car spun out of control and was hit by a minivan. Yaseni was in a coma for two and



**Pictured above:** Yaseni greets Wilbur—Rainbow's therapy dog.

a half weeks after the accident, which left her with many severe injuries. She lost the ability to speak and walk. About a month after the accident, she transferred to a hospital in Atlanta to be near her family.

From February to November 2005, Yaseni was treated in Atlanta. However, Yaseni was excited to move back to Michigan to be near her fiance, Scott. She began therapy at Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers on November 21, 2005 and currently receives outpatient therapy five days a week. Her favorite session is working with Wilbur—Rainbow's therapy dog.

When I interviewed Yaseni, she was unable to speak to me due to her injuries. Her vocal cord paresis (weakness of the vocal cords) does not allow Yaseni to have functional speech. This disorder occurs when one or both of the vocal cords (or vocal folds) do not open or close properly. Yaseni communicates by gesturing, writing, and using tools such as an alphabet board—but this may change permanently for Yaseni very soon! Yaseni will be having bilateral vocal cord injections in September. During the surgery, bulk will be added to her weakened vocal cords making it possible

**Pictured below:** Yaseni (2<sup>nd</sup> from right) develops balance and reaching skills by pushing the ball to Wilbur (therapy dog) who nudges the ball back. Physical Therapist Donna Dubel (standing) and Tara Rondy (far right) assist Yaseni.



### Yaseni's Bio

**Future Plans:** Yaseni & fiance Scott are looking forward to being married!

**Interests:** Yaseni loves dogs and has one named Katie.

**Family:** Yaseni has four siblings who live in the US. She loves to spend time with her 7-year-old son (Jerry) on weekends.

for Yaseni to regain her ability to speak (see information below).

Debbie Henning, Scott's mother, is Yaseni's guardian, and she comes with Yaseni everyday to therapy. According to physical therapist, Tara Rondy, "Debbie has been the ideal caretaker for Yaseni. It is amazing to watch how well they work together and how much fun they have in the process. As a therapist, it is wonderful to have such an involved family member." When I spoke to Debbie, Yaseni's guardian,

she commented, "Yaseni has made a lot of progress since coming to Rainbow. Everyone contributes to her getting better. From the therapists to the clients, her case manager to the therapy dogs...Everybody! It's like one big family looking out for her!" I also spoke with physical therapist Donna Dubel who trains Wilbur and handles pet therapy sessions. She stated, "Yaseni is great to work with. She gives 100% everyday and has a great sense of humor. It has been wonderful to see a special bond

develop between Wilbur and Yaseni. She really likes to work with him."

Hopefully, by the time this article goes to press, Yaseni will have undergone successful vocal cord surgery and will be able to talk to friends, family, therapists. Perhaps she will even be able to sing the Star Spangled Banner.

When I asked Yaseni what she would like to say to other TBI survivors, she wrote, "Work hard and stay in rehab!"

That's good advice. ♦

## ABOUT Vocal Cord Paralysis & Paresis

### **What are the vocal cords?**

The vocal cords are two small muscles located within the larynx (voice box) that are responsible for voice production. They are found at about the level of the Adam's apple in the neck. The vocal cords are very small – between 11 and 18 mm in length.

### **How is voice/speech produced?**

Most of the time the vocal cords lie apart, forming a "V" shaped opening. During speech, the vocal cords come together and produce sound by vibrating. Movement of the lips and tongue change this sound to create individual words and sounds.

### **What is vocal cord paralysis or paresis?**

The vocal cord is a muscle that is moved by a recurrent laryngeal nerve. If this nerve does not function properly, the vocal cord cannot move, causing paralysis. When the vocal cord muscle is no longer hooked up to the nerve, it atrophies or shrinks. This causes the vocal cord to be small and probably bowed. Paresis occurs when the vocal cords are weak, thus impairing functional speech. Additionally, the vocal cord may not be moving close enough to the middle for the other vocal cord to come

together and meet. If vocal cords do not come together, it becomes difficult or impossible to make sounds.

### **What is the treatment for vocal cord paralysis or paresis?**

There are different treatment methods, but one of the most noninvasive is Injection Medialization Laryngoplasty. This procedure provides support to vocal folds so that they no longer bow, making it possible for them to come together so speech can be produced. This procedure is often used to correct a

neurologic injury or muscle weakness that prevents full functioning of the vocal fold(s).

### **Where can I find more information about this topic?**

- American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS) in Alexandria, Virginia – [www.entnet.org](http://www.entnet.org)
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) in Rockville, Maryland – [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)
- National Center for Voice and Speech (NCVS) in Denver, Colorado – [www.ncvs.org](http://www.ncvs.org) □

