

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Lee Woodruff

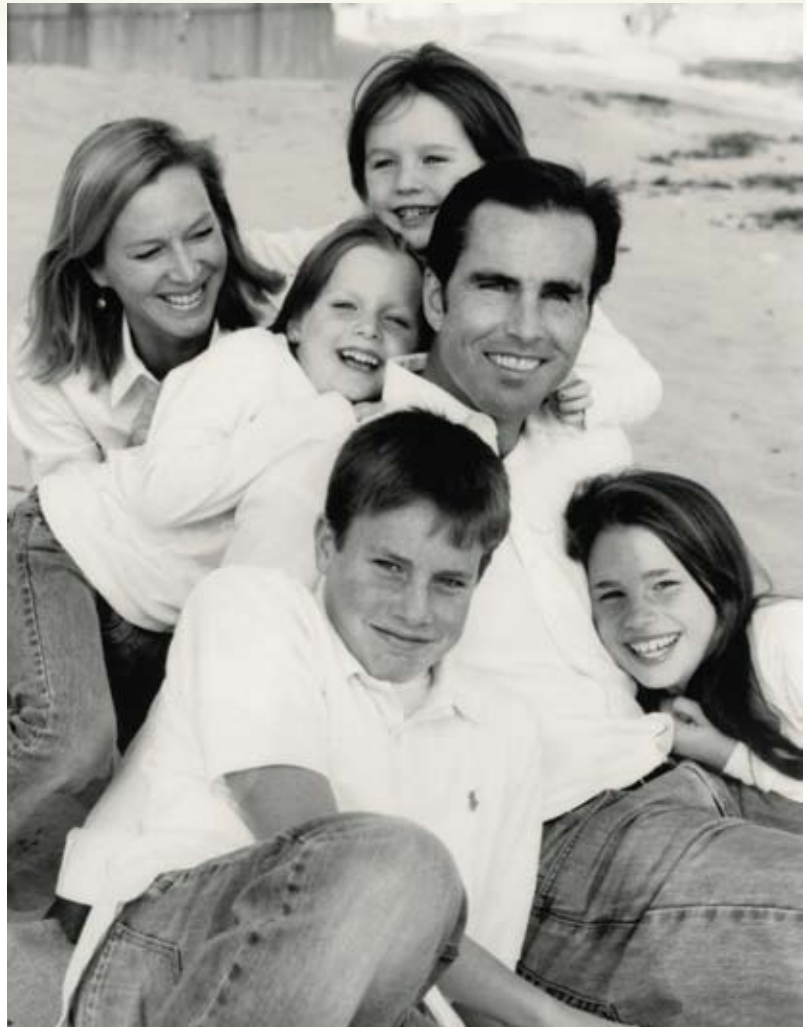
Interview by Kimberly Paetzold, Editor

In January, 2006 Bob Woodruff was promoted to the position of “World News Tonight” anchor along with Elizabeth Vargas, replacing the late Peter Jennings. This new dual-anchor setup was designed to keep one in the anchor chair and the other on location reporting world events. Two days before President Bush’s State of the Union address, Bob was in Iraq covering a story when he and his cameraman Doug Vogt were hit by an improvised explosive device (IED). Both men suffered traumatic brain injuries (TBIs).

Lee Woodruff, Bob’s wife, was kind enough to interview with “RainbowVisions.” Here’s what she had to say about her husband’s recovery and their future plans.

Hello Lee, thank you so much for your time. Your husband has had a remarkable recovery since incurring a severe brain injury in Iraq on January 29, 2006. According to information published in your book, “In an Instant,” Bob’s focal point of injury was in the left temporal lobe, potentially affecting his speech and word recall. I watched Bob in the “ABC News Special: To Iraq and Back – Bob Woodruff Reports” (2/27/07). In that special, his commentary was flawless – very professional. Also, I had the opportunity to meet him in person, and he showed very few signs of having ever been injured.

Is your husband still participating in active therapy? Could you tell us how he is doing and what challenges he is currently facing?



Pictured above: Bob and Lee Woodruff with their four children – twin daughters, Nora and Claire (top), son, Mack and daughter, Cathryn.

Bob isn’t receiving formal therapy at this time, but he still sometimes fishes for a word. The more fatigued he is, the more you see it. He falls apart much more easily at night. I noticed that when Bob has a lot of balls in the air, it’s harder for him now. Overall, I would have to say his recovery is miraculous, and he can tolerate quite a bit. Most people think he’s perfectly fine. But as his wife, I do see everything.

In your book, Bob wrote about his love for reporting. He wrote that he viewed journalism as the perfect career because he learned about a new subject or story every day, enjoyed the adrenaline rush of deadlines and loved marrying pictures

with words. Since Bob’s initial recovery, what type of projects has he worked on and what is he currently doing?

Earlier this year both of us were on our book tour and very recently Bob just returned to journalism with ABC. He works on stories for “World News Tonight,” “Nightline” and “Good Morning America.” He’ll do a series of hour-long specials like the documentary that aired in February – “Bob Woodruff: To Iraq and Back.”

He just returned from a trip to Syria covering the refugee story. Currently, there are a large number of refugees coming from Iraq into Syria. It’s really sad because there is nothing for them in Syria, but Iraq is a war-torn country and people want to

get out. He was covering the consequences and issues associated with the refugees.

One of the issues he's investigated is the young Iraqi girls coming into Syria who are turning to prostitution because there is no other way for them [and their families] to make money. It breaks the parents' hearts, but there is not food for the refugees and nobody wants to deal with them. Because there are different tribes within these groups, it is a difficult situation.

Bob will continue to cover brain injury stories. But what has been really great is to see him get back to journalism as a whole, which is what he is now focusing on full-time. He recently went to Cuba to see if he could get an interview with Fidel Castro, which didn't work out. But he did cover what's going on there and what the political future might be going forward. That was really interesting for Bob – he's always wanted to go to Cuba.

Does he have help from his producer or other staff assigned to his projects?

Bob has a producer and a camera person, but all of that is standard. There are some differences following his injury. He gets more tired and probably needs more help with his writing compared to what he used to need. I think his hours are going to have to change because he requires more rest. For the most part, his recovery really is miraculous, and I am amazed that he has stayed pretty true to how he has worked in the past.

Is ABC providing more supports for Bob out in the field?

It's really early in the process, maybe too early to tell. Bob is trying to get his group together and talking about the specials they are going to cover. He is still just getting his feet on the ground, so time will tell. I will have more to say in six months or so, but for now, so far so good.

I would like to ask a question regarding your personal outlook. In 1994, you lost



Pictured above: *The tank Bob Woodruff was traveling in just seconds before an IED exploded. ABC cameraman Doug Vogt took the picture as he and Bob were preparing to report. The Iraqi soldier pictured reportedly lost his hand in the attack.*

Taji, Iraq

January 29, 2006

Two days before President Bush was scheduled to deliver his State of the Union address, Bob Woodruff's ABC News group – producer Vinnie Malhotra, cameraman Doug Vogt and soundman Magnus Macedo – wanted to get a first-hand look at the U.S. Military hand over of security to the Iraqi forces. The group was looking for concrete examples of U.S. and Iraqi troop cooperation, and the American troops felt that Taji was a good example.

The morning of January 29, the military was scheduled to take the ABC group to a local water treatment plant. Now under Iraqi security, the plant provided fresh water for the town outfitted with helmets and body armor. The news group decided to ride in an Iraqi tank to get a good look at what was happening from the perspective of the local troops. After mounting a camera on the front of the tank, all four newsmen along with an Iraqi interpreter climbed inside, unaware the tank was to take the lead position in the convoy. Hoping to do a stand-up interview through the tank hatch, Bob kept moving back and forth from inside the tank to outside trying to help the soundman figure out how to compensate for the tank's loud roar. Magnus and Vinnie remained inside, and after traveling only three miles, they approached an area (pictured above) where insurgents often positioned themselves. The interpreter advised both Doug and Bob to get inside the tank. Suddenly, there was a horrific blast – A band of Iraqi insurgents detonated a remote-controlled IED. Both Doug Vogt and Bob Woodruff suffered traumatic brain injuries. ❖

For a first hand account of the incident, go to page 12 – Interview with Vinnie Malhotra.

a child, and the grief was overwhelming. In your book, you stated, "The journey through that grief prepared me, in some way, for the grief to come." Could you explain your thoughts?

I think if you've never experienced grief before in your life it's a very shocking experience. The sudden tragedy takes your breath away, and of course you are not ready for it. It completely destroys your sense of normalcy, and you feel awful for a long time after the incident. If you're not prepared for that, it is really shocking. You tend to feel that the rest of your life will end up that way. The loss of our child prepared me because I learned that time really does heal – the situation really does get better, but it takes time as trite and cliché as that sounds. Having gone through that experience at the time, I felt like that was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. So when Bob was injured, I felt like

I was on familiar ground. I was grieving over what happened to Bob.

Did you find this experience to be different than the loss of your child?

It was different because when you lose a child, at least you have your husband to commiserate with, even though men and women grieve differently. But when you lose your husband, that's your life partner; and when it's brain injury, nobody can truly tell you how they will recover or what's going to happen or what it's going to be like. You get stuck in limbo.

During the first few months of Bob's recovery, you wrote, "I was living in a fog of optimism." Was that your defense mechanism, and did it help you cope?

Absolutely. I did not want to learn too much about brain injury; I didn't want to get on the Internet, and I didn't want to google brain injury. I didn't want to read articles or hear stories. Until Bob woke up from his coma and until I knew what

deficits we were dealing with, I didn't want to make assumptions, and I didn't want people telling me what it was going to be like.

So what was it like when Bob woke up?

When Bob woke up, his first words when I walked into the room were, "Where have you been, Sweetie?" I was thrilled. And after that, I took every little step toward recovery as a positive. Of course I had worries, Bob was missing a lot of words. But just having him awake after five weeks was amazing – for a while, that was enough for me.

Has Bob suffered from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

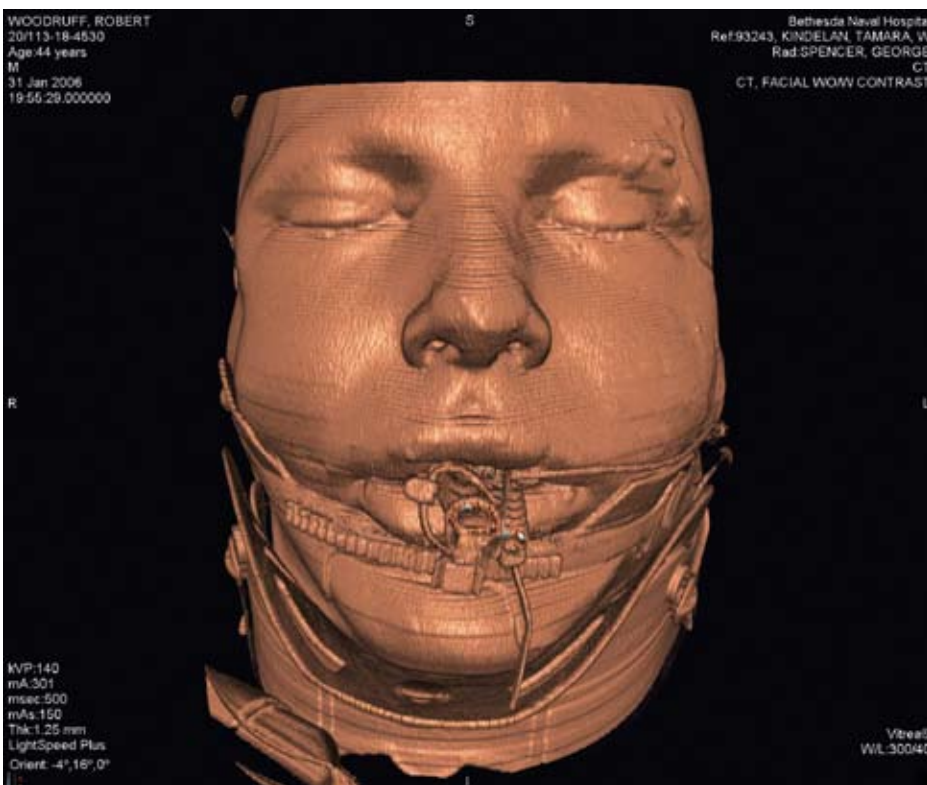
No PTSD, although sometimes Bob gets a little down, but it's not much different from the way he was prior to the injury. He hasn't had the difficulties with depression like so many others with TBI. Amazingly, he has escaped much of the worst of that aspect of brain injury recovery. What I do see that's different is that Bob can get overwhelmed more easily, and sometimes his emotions are more on the surface.

What, if any, benefits have come from this tragedy?

It's been a crazy year, and the pace hasn't slowed down. So, the dishes sit in the sink a whole lot more. But as a family, I think we are more conscious of living in the moment. We are all together and we are all appreciative of life – it's so precious. The kids are doing great. They get a little sad when Bob is out of town, but they are not afraid.

What advice would you like to share with spouses going through the same experience?

I think you need to hold onto your hope and your faith. Family plays such an important role in the healing process. It



Pictured above: A 3-D CT scan of Bob's face taken January 31, 2006 at the Bethesda Naval Hospital

definitely takes a will to live and recover, but it's also helping someone heal with love and touch. There are so many different tools that can be used in recovery.

You have to let yourself acknowledge that there are bad days because they will come. For a while, I had to just live hour to hour, not even day by day to get through. But anything is possible.

Your family established the Bob Woodruff Family Fund for Traumatic Brain Injury to assist military veterans with cognitive rehabilitation and other care needs. Could you tell us about this foundation?

Our number one mission is to help improve the lives of servicemen – those with traumatic brain injuries (TBIs)

who were wounded in service to their country and their families. TBI is the signature wound of this war. We are not only interested in helping those who sustain severe injuries like Bob, but those with mild brain injuries suffering with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combat fatigue and other stress disorders.

Will you be working with the Veterans Administration to accomplish your goals?

Yes. We are going to need participation from the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs as well as from the U.S. Department of Defense. It's going to have to be a combined effort. This project will not go anywhere if we do not work together.

We also want to advocate so that returning veterans are able to access private providers when it doesn't make sense to go to a veteran's hospital. Many soldiers are from small towns or rural areas and don't have reasonable access to therapy or supports. I am actually going down to Capitol Hill to speak with a group of senators working on bills to help correct this situation.

We just hired an executive director - René Bardorf. She has worked with Marines with brain injuries for a long time. She was with Marines for Life, an organization that provides transition assistance to Marines leaving active service. René is going to help determine what is viable and possible for this foundation. ♦

Photo by Cathrine White

Lee Woodruff

Lee Woodruff is a public relations executive and freelance writer. With more than 20 years experience in marketing and public relations, she works with international cosmetic company Benefit Cosmetics and Built NY, a line of home products. Since opening her own business in 1991, she has handled a wide variety of clients from the healthcare and travel industry to electronics and accessories market.

As a freelance writer, Lee has written numerous corporate materials, and her articles have appeared in Health magazine, Redbook, Country Living magazine and Family Fun, to name a few. Over the years, she has written articles with a personal slant about family life and the often humorous and poignant moments of being a parent.

Currently, Lee is also a contributing editor of Family Fun magazine where she writes about health and travel. She also serves as a spokesperson, appearing on national and regional broadcasts about various topics on behalf of the magazine.

Lee and her husband Bob are authors of "In an Instant" – a book about their family's difficult journey during Bob's critical injury in Iraq while anchoring a broadcast for ABC News. It is also a story of life, relationship and family.

The mother of four children, she lives in Westchester County, New York, with her husband Bob, an anchor/reporter for ABC News. ❖

