

Misti Morningstar

At 17 years old, with only a semester until her high school graduation, Misti Morningstar attended a prestigious boarding school. She had plans to attend an Ivy League University and dreamed of becoming a medical doctor. This particular cold Saturday morning in February, her parents were away on vacation and she had decided to spend her morning shopping at the mall.

As Misti drove to the shopping mall with a companion, she entered an intersection where a truck slipped through the yellow light that had turned red. The driver of the eighteen-wheeler never saw Misti and drove right over her car. Her body was crushed and cut out of the tangled debris by emergency workers. She was airlifted to a local hospital where CT scans revealed contusions and bruising to the right frontal and left parietal lobes of the brain with swelling of the cerebrum.

Misti remained in the hospital for a month until her condition stabilized. It was then that the family had to decide where she would go for rehabilitation. Louise, Misti's mother, and her father Harry looked into suitable facilities. They both decided the most suitable facility, four hours away from home, was the best choice since it offered what they thought to be the best rehabilitation.

Because of funding and her desire to get Misti rehabilitated, Louise Morningstar decided to become the primary caregiver for her daughter after only four months of Hospitalization and Residential Rehabilitation.

The Book...

Journey Through Brain Trauma, A Mother's Story of Her Daughter's Recovery is a story of love and survival from a parent's perspective. It covers the stages of brain injury recovery that spanned five years after Misti's accident. The author, Louise Morningstar, shares her story with candor, offering information and much needed hope for parents in similar situations.

I was fortunate to interview Misti and Louise. They both endured many hardships, but were able to work through problems as they arose. I recommend the book for parents or caretakers of survivors and hope this interview will inspire other parents to persevere and get the professional help necessary for TBI rehabilitation.

Interview with Misti & Louise

Q. Misti, you went through quite a bit. Do you remember



Pictured above from left: **Misti and Louise**

anything about your accident or the three months of intensive residential therapy you received?

I don't have much of a memory of the accident or afterwards. I didn't even know what they [medical professionals] meant when they said "brain trauma," and it was hard to tell what I truly remember and what I was told. I was in residential rehabilitation for about three months, and I do remember having lots of therapy, which was very difficult for me. At the time, I thought that I was fine and wasn't aware that I couldn't just leave and go home. I remember I thought I was dreaming a lot of it, and I thought my parents were keeping me in the basement and wouldn't let me out. It took quite a long time to get back so that I could function. It was all such a process.

Q. At what point do you think you became aware of what really happened to you?

After I left the rehab center, I went to live with my mother at our beach house. The awareness that I was different hit me while I was having therapy there. I remember hearing the other people going out at night and I was not able to—I really felt different then.

Q. Are there any residual problems that you find difficult to deal with since your accident?

Well, I haven't physically cried since I had the accident. I am

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no longer able to produce tears and that's upsetting. Sometimes I think that if I could just have a really good cry I'd feel better, but nothing comes out. It's frustrating, but it's been 18 years so it's most likely not coming back. Controlling my anger has been another difficult issue I continue to deal with. I tend to get overly upset and blow things out of proportion.

Q. Is there any advice you would like to give to others going through traumatic brain injury recovery?

I feel I've been able to cope because of my faith and spirituality. You know, they should create a twelve-step recovery group like AA for people with disabilities, saying that I can't control it, I can't change it, but God can—this would be a great thing.

I do have advice for other teens—don't be stupid and wear your seat belt. Please take safety precautions and don't go overboard like you live in a bubble. I yell at my kids all the time; when they ride their bikes or ride their scooters they must always wear a helmet. I know what can happen and why invite trouble?

Q. You were able to finish high school and attend college after your accident. You studied and worked very hard to get your college degree. Do you have any advice for kids going through that?

Read and take advantage of as much cognitive therapy as possible. I did logic problems and memory games all the time and that really helped. Get your brain thinking and working as much as possible. I used to play Wheel of Fortune on the computer and spent time learning the Capitals of the States. Those types of activities help build memory.

Q. Can you tell me a little bit about your life today?

I am married and have two children; a nine-year-old boy and seven-year-old girl. I do quite a bit of volunteer work. At the school, I help in the kindergarten class one day a week and in the cafeteria as needed. I am the Treasurer at my church, and I'm on the Board for the Technology Assistance Guaranteed Loan Program, which decides on loans for disabled individuals.

Q. Thank you Misti; now I would like to ask your mother a few questions. Louise, in your book you said that having family nearby during the rehab process is very important because they can greatly help the recovery process. Can you elaborate on this?

I know if I hadn't been there when Misti began doing her finger movements (sign language), the therapists and medical

professionals would have missed this completely. When Misti was young she learned sign language, and I learned it as well. When Misti began signing, the nurses thought it was involuntary finger movements and wouldn't even listen to me. At the time, Misti was in the wheelchair with a restraint to hold up her shoulders. A bar went across the wheelchair where her legs bent to keep her from sliding out, and her hands rested on a tray. When her hands would curl in, we would flatten them out and put them back on the tray. I noticed her fingers moving, and she became frustrated. She would pull her hands in, and then when I straightened them out I noticed that her fingers were spelling. I think that she pulled those hands up because she knew that I would straighten them out. One day when we passed the cafeteria, she signed, "I want French fries." I don't know how long she was trying to finger spell to me before that, but this was one of the most important things that happened. It would have been missed without family intervention.

Q. Louise, you wrote that it's important for families to understand the pitfalls of brain trauma and recovery. If you had been better informed about brain injury it might have saved you a lot of pain. Are there any specific examples of this?

After coming out of the coma, Misti went through many stages of recovery. Very few people don't experience each stage, but unfortunately nobody explains this to the survivor's family. They must educate themselves.

I remember there was a minister whose son was coming out of a coma, and he was standing in the hall of the hospital crying. I went over to him—his son had just started the cursing phase. His minister had brought up his boy to be religious, and you don't do this and don't say that. When anybody would walk into this young man's room the curse words would start flying out. Every tenth word was Coca-Cola, and we had to laugh because he'd come up with curse words we weren't even sure we'd ever heard before! Once his father realized that everyone coming out of a coma has this problem, it was a little easier for him to accept.

The medical professionals said there were stages, but nobody explained them to me until it was almost over. I just started noticing that all the patients there were going through similar stages. When you can look at it and say "Oh, we're into the next phase, we're getting better," that's terrific. But that poor minister was beside himself because he simply did not know. Take the time to talk with other parents that have been there. These people have been through it and can help you understand.

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Q. Do you have other experiences you would like to share? Something that may help other parents?

Yes. It had been suggested to us that Misti not watch Soap Operas. She enjoyed them before her accident, but afterwards she had a difficult time determining reality from fantasy. At the time, we had a facilitator that knew Misti should not watch these programs, but spent the afternoons watching Soap Operas with her. Misti would later lash out, not understanding what was real or what was fiction, and this caused a lot of problems. It's funny; I wouldn't have thought Soap Operas would have been a negative influence until I realized what was happening. Misti thought her family and friends were doing the same things as the actors on those shows. It turned out to be a very bad situation.

We did let Misti watch game shows because it stimulated her mind. We allowed Disney programs and animal shows, etc., but kept her away from serious dramas that could be easily mistaken for reality in her mind.

I do think TV does a big injustice with how they present brain trauma. In many shows, people just wake up from a coma and go on with their lives. That's not how it happens in real life. Even if you have a relatively mild brain injury, most likely you will have deficits for years.

Q. Misti went through a phase of sexual "disinhibition." How did you find ways to cope with this?

Well, while she was going through that stage, we had a facilitator. Because we were reluctant to leave her alone, we made sure she had 24-hour supervision. I think Misti needed approval from the opposite sex and needed to know that she still was attractive. Evidently it's a phase that many TBI victims go through.

In order to cope, we tried hard to do everything with her. We took her to parks, anywhere we could go that would get her mind off of this. What made it especially difficult was that her boyfriend, the one that she was going steady with prior to her accident, went off to college just about the time that this disinhibition became a problem. They had plans to marry—he wanted to become a doctor and she wanted to raise a family. After he went off to college, this young man would call Misti and tell her about a girl that he had met. I would hear Misti screaming over the telephone—I can't relay what she said, but she would become violently angry. Finally, I called his mother and I told her what was going on, and asked that he not call anymore. That was really hard for Misti; she was trying to get back her

self-confidence and I regretted ever having let him come back into the picture after the accident. I don't think she would have remembered him, had I kept him away. Hindsight is always better than foresight. That was the most difficult summer of my life.

Q. Do you feel Misti should have stayed in residential rehabilitation a little longer so this stage might have been a little easier to work through?

I think it would have been easier to cope if Misti could have stayed a little longer. When I first took Misti home, I had five therapists a day coming in and a facilitator to watch her so that I could go for groceries. Unless somebody had the proper training, they weren't able to handle Misti.

Q. It wasn't that long afterward that she progressed enough to attend college. How did this work out?

It wasn't very long. Misti was still in the wheelchair and the facilitator or myself would take her to classes. Eventually, she wanted to live in the dorm, and that was scary because she was still acting out; but we made it through. Misti met her husband while she was at school, and he's been wonderful for her. She is still married to Rich and has two beautiful children. He has been a big help, and Misti has done a great job raising her children. I've always told other parents—stick in there. You have to stay with them. We did and things have worked out. There is life and hope after brain trauma. ❖

Interview and article by Kimberly Paetzold, CBIS, RainbowVisions Editor; Copyright June 2006 – Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers, Inc.

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