

RAINBOW ALUMNI

Heather Sell

By Kimberly Paetzold, *Editor*

We talk about an individual's *will to succeed* as being key to successful TBI rehabilitation, but often there is more to the story. Loved ones that fully support and realistically approach brain injury rehabilitation can make a big difference. When someone loses cognitive abilities, having someone close to the survivor to fill in the blanks for therapists and the rehabilitation team helps the process. Premorbid personality traits don't go away. Knowing likes, dislikes, motivational hot points, etc., helps specialists identify treatment approaches. It's also important that family and friends understand that rehabilitation takes time and that cognitive deficits can be difficult to deal with. Understanding and patience is so important and often comes from being informed.

Many wonderful families and individuals have successfully moved through Rainbow's Continuum of Care. Their stories are inspirational and demonstrate



the importance of family education and support. The following story offers insight of a supportive and successful family...

Heather Sell's accident

It was spring, 2004, when Heather and her fiancé (Pete) went motorcycle riding. Pete (the driver) and Heather (the passenger) were in Indiana where state law does not require helmets. It wasn't long until they collided with nature: A deer ran into their Harley. Heather required a trach tube at the scene and incurred a traumatic brain injury (TBI) with aphasia, damage to her vision, dental trauma, a fractured finger and right-sided weakness. Pete was also badly hurt with broken bones, but was able to leave the hospital after a week.

Heather's Hospitalization

Heather remained hospitalized for 3 months. When I asked Heather's parents how they coped, they replied, "At first we felt despair, but each day we would see some small improvement that kept us going. One day, she read the numbers off a sales receipt. It took another month until she read numbers again, but every day we had something. When she was in the ICU we would watch her, and we knew our Heather was still in there."

The Sell Family spent day after day at the hospital, and when it finally came time for Heather to discharge, they knew she needed additional therapy. Well informed about her injuries and impairments, they visited TBI Rehabilitation Centers. According to her sister Letitia, "We felt the treatment offered at each facility we visited was good, but Rainbow was by far the most appealing and warm. [Their Residential Program] was the most like home. We didn't want to be selfish and make [traveling] easy for the family; we wanted the best rehabilitation for Heather."

Heather comes to Rainbow

When Heather first admitted into Rainbow's Residential Program, she was unsteady and spent most of her time in a wheelchair. Debbie May (Residential Program Manager) recalls Heather being angry the first day she came. "She definitely did not want to stay. She cried, and because of her aphasia, she would mix up her words and become frustrated," stated Debbie. "Initially, Heather didn't eat well, couldn't walk, didn't speak well and was very weak."



(Above) The Sell Family visits Rainbow in January, 2006 (From left to right) Robert (Father), Heather, Sharon (mother) and Letitia (sister).

(Pictured right) Heather (in blue) with her 3 brothers and sister Letitia just after she left the hospital in 2004.





Wedding Bells Ring!

Heather (top right) & Pete (far left) finally were able to marry! They tied the knot this past October in the church next door to their home. They had their honeymoon in December – a cruise.

The Sell Family was realistic about Heather’s injuries and rehabilitation process. They helped enormously by encouraging her – they would tell her, *“This is your job Heather – something you have to do. It’s like going back to school.”* Her ultimate goal was to go home, and she got up every day ready for rehab, trying to reach this goal. The family worked hand-in-hand with the treatment team and sought guidance from Rainbow professionals: *“We feared pushing her [Heather] too hard to regain back her old life. We wanted her to be motivated but not pushed, so we let the professionals and Heather guide us,”* stated Sharon Sell.

Debbie May worked with the Sell family and commented, *“Their love, support and encouragement was Heather’s inspiration. The family made it their business to know about the acute rehab setting. They provided us with complete and accurate information, which helped us do our job better. I was impressed with how they made it their business to become informed.”*

Heather was fortunate to have such a loving and supportive family. Their

interaction was frequent: Her mother and father would try to come every weekend and her siblings would visit during the week. Heather worked hard, and that led to quick progress. Within nine months, she learned to feed herself without assistance, took care of her personal needs, could do her own laundry, learned to walk and made significant speech improvements. In March of 2005, just short of a year since her accident, Heather attained most of her rehabilitation goals and was able to transition home with outpatient services.

Continued Progress...

Heather has made gains since leaving Rainbow’s Program. She had eye surgery due to double vision, and her corrected vision has helped her progress even further. She had dental work completed and feels much better about her appearance. She recently married her fiancé, got her driver’s license, and volunteers at church and a dental office.

The Sell family shares their thoughts...

Heather’s Mother: *“We wanted Heather to become as independent as possible. We never held her back and we let her lead us. Heather is now living quite independently– but we still keep an eye on her.”*

Heather’s Sister Leticia: *“We were a little concerned that we were taking Heather out of Rainbow’s program too early, as she was making rapid gains there. We didn’t want her to become depressed by not being able to come home when she did, and it turned out well. She has continued to make progress.”*

When Heather saw the medical and therapy paperwork that went into her rehabilitation, her family told her, *“That’s how we put Humpty Dumpty back together, Heather. These are all the people that helped you get better.”* Heather broke down and cried. She doesn’t remember all the therapy, but she knows that her family and a dedicated team of professionals worked hard to get her back. ♦