

A conversation with Nico Forgione

At the end of an afternoon shift as a dining associate at Rainbow Rehabilitation Center's NeuroRehab Campus®, Nico Forgione sat outside on the building's deck, enjoying a sunny day. He stared up at the sky as he talked of his culinary arts classes at Oakland Community College and plans for the future. He spoke rapidly and confidently, with good-natured charm and unstoppable energy. An avid fan of extreme sports, he bounced and gestured with great animation as he explained his love of rugby, dirt bikes and skateboarding.

It's hard to miss Nico's zeal for life, even after spending only a few minutes with him. What you can't tell is that Nico has a traumatic brain injury.

In February 2008, Nico was struck by a motor vehicle while crossing the street. The accident resulted in a traumatic brain injury, a fractured pelvis and seizure disorder. Nico was in a coma for three days.

No one thought Nico would walk again. They did not even know if he would wake up from his coma.

But he did.

In the months after his accident, Nico struggled with aggression, a bad attitude, behavioral issues, elopement (running away) and drugs. He was impulsive and had difficulty with problem solving. He had a history of depression and aggressive behavior, getting into fist fights. In the past, he did not follow medical advice.

In addition, he had a left side facial twitch when he grew stressed. He had increased irritability and withdrawn behavior. His hands shook when he tried to control them. Nico would become argumentative and sometimes dazed in conversations.

After living on his own since leaving the hospital, Nico was admitted as a client at Rainbow in July 2008.

"The first couple of times I was at Rainbow, I eloped. I didn't want to be here," Nico explained. "The hardest thing for me to overcome was being told 'no,' so I didn't let anybody tell me no. I heard it, but didn't listen."

As part of his programming at Rainbow, Nico worked in the vocational program at Rainbow's Oakland Center in Farmington, Mich. After his three-month assessment, he joined a community enclave and went back to school.

From there, Nico continued to improve.

"He wanted to be a chef," explained Nicole Rondini, Nico's



occupational therapist at Rainbow's Oakland Center. "It was his main goal, so as soon as a position became available at the NeuroRehab Campus, it looked like a good fit. He still had a lot of behaviors we were dealing with, such as positive drug screens and negative behavior, but becoming a chef was the dangling carrot for him – knowing this was out there waiting for him really turned his behavior around."

But Nico's progress had a lot of ups and downs. "Cooking was motivation to start to do things for himself," Nicole said. "He would do really well for a period of time, then self destruct."

With each setback, Nico was back at square one. He regressed to a sheltered workshop and individual occupational therapy. He no longer received independent time as a reward. To get back what he lost, Nico had to enroll in a substance abuse class and prove he could handle the responsibility of being on his own at the workplace.

A conversation with Nico Forgione *continued*

After his brain injury, Nico's whole life changed. He was dealing with personal issues and addictions in addition to sustaining a brain injury. "His coping mechanisms he used all along weren't going to work this time," Nicole explained. "I'm really proud of him for overcoming it."

Nico said that one of the best things about Rainbow is that it doesn't fix things for you. "They give you the tools to succeed and it is up to you to do it. I was sick of hearing everybody grumble and complain – they kept telling me to do it for us or this. Finally, one day, I decided to do it for me."

Nico realized he could do more; be more. "I decided to strive for myself," he said. "I still feel like I could do more [than what I am doing now] and keep doing more every day."

Once Nico put his mind to it, he began to improve. "I was sick of hearing mental health therapists talk about my patterns of behaviors." So he changed them.

After working his way back up the program, Nico was working at the NeuroRehab Campus as a dining associate. He did so well in the position with the vocational program that he applied for the full-time dining associate position that was available. After interviewing against other external candidates, he got the job.

Executive Chef at the NeuroRehab Campus Cynthia Halse said, "Nico is very eager to learn. He has a great attitude about work and is very flexible."

Nico discharged from Rainbow's program in Spring 2010. He now lives independently while working at the NeuroRehab Campus.

In the end, it was Nico's change in attitude that allowed him to succeed. "Don't ever let anybody tell you no — you can't do it. I believe there's a possibility for everything. I wasn't supposed to walk again — I heard them but I didn't listen. Stay focused and you can do it." ❖

Written by Nicole Bonomini, Rainbow Visions Assistant Editor; Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers. Copyright June 2010 – Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers, Inc.

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