

'Still Playing' after a Traumatic Brain Injury

From Kessler Foundation's Fall 2011 Newsletter



Matthew Gross was living the life that most twenty-somethings dream of—the life of a rock star. Traveling the world, making his own schedule, and surrounded by beautiful young women, he thought he was headed for fame. But on February 23, 1997, when Matt was 27, everything changed.

As he and his friends were ice-skating with a few au pairs that were fans of his band, Matt had the idea to take them sightseeing to the Empire State Building. While friend Chris didn't want go, Matt pressured him into it. While admiring the view of NYC from the top of the Empire State Building, a man approached them and inquired about their nationality. An odd question, he thought, but the man went on to make friendly conversation about the city. After observing the scenery, Matt and the girls were ready to leave but Chris was getting one last look. Next, gunshots.

The man went on a shooting rampage. Chris was killed instantly—the only victim who lost his life. Matt doesn't remember what happened next, but he suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) from a gunshot to the head. From the way the bullet penetrated his brain, it seemed like he went after the shooter. Matt woke up in the hospital speaking Danish, a language that he became fluent in while living in Sweden. He couldn't remember what year it was and was behaving like a child.

He left the hospital and went to Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in hopes of regaining some functional and intellectual aspects of his life. Upon leaving Kessler, he moved back in with his father. While he continued writing more than 300 songs, he couldn't remember the lyrics. Saddened, he realized that his career of making music was over.

"My injury changed everything," Matt explained. "I need things to be in order for my life now, which is nothing like my life before my injury. I played in a band. I lived in Denmark for five years. I was on my own. I met women. And now, there are no women. I'm definitely not on my own. I work for a company where people tell me what to do. A lot of things changed."

Due to the brain injury, Matt has difficulty responding appropriately to social cues. He says what is on his mind before considering how people may react to his comments. Luckily, his family and close friends understand and know not to take it personally. Understanding the importance of keeping friends after injury, he said, "There are certain people who are doing well [after their injuries] but it has to do with their frame of mind, the friends that they keep, and what they keep from their lives prior to their injuries."

The women he meets, however, aren't aware of his disability and have a hard time overlooking his remarks. Employers are also less lenient.

"I've had six or seven jobs since I became brain injured and I lost all of them. I didn't really know how to behave for the jobs I had," Matt said.

Struggling to find a job, he went to Employment Horizons, a Kessler Foundation grantee that specializes in placing people with disabilities in suitable employment. Soon, he was working for a school in which he sang to the young students. As long as he knew the songs and had the music in front of him, he could enjoy what he loved.

Matt also participated in two research studies that examined ways to improve new learning in individuals with TBI and the relationship among apathy, depression, and executive function after TBI. He is working to improve his memory so that he can be more independent in the future.

Currently working for the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, where he distributes school supplies and clothes to local children, Matt is determined to hold on to this job. He has a firm understanding of his limitations and how to overcome them in order to successfully do the job.

"I have very bad planning skills, get tired very easily, and can't do several things at once," he noted. "At work, they give me tasks one at a time. There are certain things I do everyday. I think when I have a structure of things to do, it helps a lot."



Despite his challenges, never before has he felt so rewarded and is happy knowing that he's helping others at his current job. "Every time I walk in there, I'm so proud of that place. We do such great things," Matt exclaimed.

Now, at 42 years old, he's struggling to find a balance between his life prior to his injury and his current life. In an effort to be on his own, he moved out of his father's house and lives in a group facility, which provides transportation to stores and work. While Matt craves more independence, he is moving forward and finding happiness in his work. He hopes to live on his own in the future. "I'd like to get a place where I can live on my own to just be free," he said. "I also started doing open mics again for the first time, so I enjoy playing music. I hope I get back into that and writing music. I'd like to meet a woman at some point in the future."

Kessler Foundation researches rehabilitation treatment and strategies to help people like Matt, and funds employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Help us write new stories! For more information, visit www.kesslerfoundation.org.