

Heads Up for Hope Board Members: Leslie Davis, Steve Lucido, Heidi Press, Diane Smooke, and Elizabeth Sullivan



THE TRUTH BEHIND TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURIES

Local Non-Profit Heads Up for Hope Offers Support for TBI Patients and Their Caregivers

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As you may have noticed, behavioral health has become close to topic “A” in nearly everyone’s mind. From local and network news programming and not-for-profit boardrooms to the kitchen table, discussions of mental health issues are practically ubiquitous. It’s front and center in newspapers and TV, as well as social media. But if you listen, watch, or read carefully enough, it will soon become clear to you that there is one

important facet of behavioral health that has been either overlooked entirely or given little more than passing mention in the discussion – Traumatic Brain Injury, or TBI.

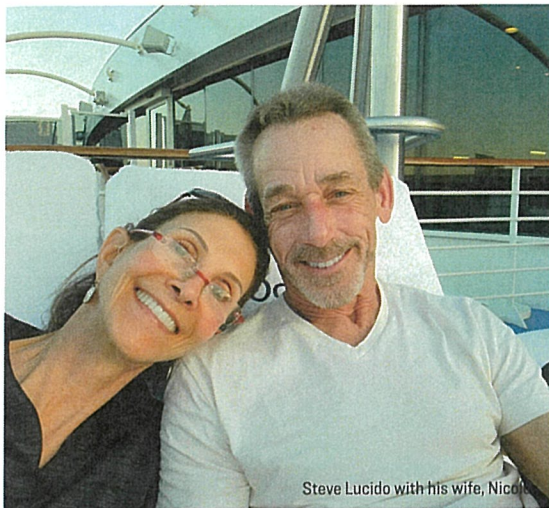
More often than not, the causes of behavioral health issues are explained to be a result of poverty, race, lack of opportunity, pollution, geography, housing availability, drugs, the environment, family issues, sexual abuse,

or any combination thereof. And while those are certainly contributing factors, a traumatic brain injury is rarely if ever put on that list. In fact, TBI is all too often treated as a separate issue altogether. Based on a recent conversation I had with the Board of Directors of **Heads up for Hope (HUH)**, Steve Lucido and Diane Smooke from Singletree, Elizabeth Sullivan who lives in Eagle, Leslie Davis of Edwards, and Minturn’s Dr. Heidi Press, that’s all about to change if they have anything to say about it. HUH is a fairly new local not-for-profit focused solely on brain injury and the devastating effects it can have both on the survivors and their caregivers.

Indulge me for a moment while I recount the personal stories of these five amazing and dedicated people and the disconnect that all too often occurs between traumatic brain injury and behavioral health.

In 2014, Steve Lucido was riding his motorcycle through the Highway 6 Edwards intersection when it was still controlled by a traffic light, prior to the construction of the roundabout, when he was involved in a horrific accident. He suffered devastating injuries and was rushed to the hospital in Vail. He had multiple broken bones and an obvious head injury that resulted in the left side of his scalp being detached from his skull and hanging over his ear. The talented surgeons at Vail Health repaired his broken bones and reattached his scalp and Steve was sent home to begin a long recovery. The doctors were confident that Steve would make a full recovery, but they never told him that he might have incurred a traumatic brain injury despite his obvious head trauma.

His body eventually did heal, but he soon discovered that his life had changed dramatically. He began suffering unexplained fits of anger and depression. These changes placed a tremendous strain on his 34-year marriage to the extent that his wife asked him to leave their home in the Valley and move to a property they owned in San Diego. He did leave, but things did not improve for Steve. He continued to experience unexplained irrational anger outbursts that led him to confront strangers in the streets of San Diego as a means to quell his anxieties. Despite these



Steve Lucido with his wife, Nicole



Diane Smooke



Elizabeth and Mitchell at Golf 4 Disabled People at the Broken Tee in Englewood



Art instructor, Jeremy Greene, a brain injury survivor, leading a class for other HUH members

circumstances, Steve never sought help because he was unaware there was an issue with his mental health.

His wife eventually asked Steve to return for a couple of weeks to take care of their dog while she was away on a business trip. It was during this visit that Steve ran into an old friend, Dr. Reg Franciose. During their conversations, Dr. Franciose noticed that Steve was having trouble expressing himself and organizing his thoughts in a logical sequence. He suggested that Steve see Kim Greene at Vail Health, an injury prevention specialist. As a result of this visit, Kim, for the first time, accurately diagnosed Steve's brain injury. This was in 2017, a full three years after his accident!

It was Kim who recommended that Steve contact the Polytrauma Project at the Veterans' Administration when he returned to California. He did that and finally found a way to address the effects of his traumatic brain injury. Using group therapy, coping tools, individual counseling, yoga, and meditation, Steve

was able to start the long process of healing, but never curing, the devastation his accident caused in his brain.

Eventually, Steve moved back to the Valley with his wife, Nicole, and they began the difficult process of restructuring their marriage. Steve soon realized that continuing his therapy in the Valley was not an option as there was no local group or program where he could get together with other TBI patients to share their experiences and issues. Determined to change this, he set out to start a brain injury support group. All he needed was a bit of help to start up an organization that was so very much needed in the Valley.

He found that help after securing a meeting location and putting an ad in the *Vail Daily* in March 2018. Steve advertised for fellow brain injury victims or their caregivers who wanted to join him in forming a new organization offering a new approach (for this Valley, at least) to coping with TBI.

The first person to respond to Steve's ad was Diane Smooke, an Occupational

Therapist with 40 years of experience, which made her just what the new group needed, a medical professional with firsthand experience in dealing with the devastating effects of a brain injury. In addition, Diane was, and still is, a strong advocate for adding a qualified neurologist to the staff of Vail Health.

Diane shares the opinion of so many others in this Valley... if you need orthopedic care as a result of a ski injury or simply the wear and tear that comes along as one of the burdens of aging, there is no better care to be had in the country than at Vail Health. She also believes that the Shaw Cancer Center offers cutting-edge cancer treatments rarely found in a community of our size. But as an experienced Occupational Therapist, she sees, perhaps better than most, that given the relative frequency of head injuries incurred on the slopes, we would be well served by having a neurologist at Vail Health. Diane has made that the focus of her mission on the Board of HUH.



HONK & WAVE: Diane, Elizabeth, and Steve on a blizzard morning at the round-about in Avon

The next recruit to the project was Elizabeth Sullivan. Elizabeth's son, Mitchell Lee, was a gifted competitive high school skier while attending the Vail Ski and Snowboard Academy. Over the course of his ski career, he suffered a total of more than ten concussions and in 2013, he experienced a TBI at a ski competition in Aspen. The doctor who originally treated Mitchell came up with the appalling solution of recommending that Mitchell be confined to a closet to remove any outside stimuli that might trigger the episodic irrationality that he was demonstrating. To Elizabeth, that recommendation seemed rather medieval at best.

She rejected it and chose rather to keep him at home and help him graduate from VSSA which he did in 2014. He matriculated to CU, but an unfortunate event occurred during his freshman year which resulted, sadly, in him leaving CU. Mitchell is currently living in a brain injury support house in Denver.

Elizabeth also saw Steve's ad in the Vail Daily, and, after her experience with the lack of care or help Mitchell had received after his TBI, signed up as a caregiver. On top of the TBI that Mitchell incurred, he has also been diagnosed with a mental illness to add to the challenges he and Elizabeth face.

Leslie Davis became aware of HUH after her son, Christopher, a BMHS athlete, was diagnosed with a TBI

following several concussions incurred while playing soccer, hockey, and an automobile accident in 2010. Unlike many TBI patients whose injuries often go undiagnosed for months or even years, Christopher's affliction was diagnosed by his physician and a neurologist in Boulder. It is important to note that Battle Mountain High School employs a cognitive test called imPACT. It is required that any student who wants to play sports take the test to determine a cognitive baseline. If they do incur a head injury, they are tested again to determine if their level of cognition has slipped below their baseline.

As a family, they began the medical and holistic journey towards his recovery. That journey continues to this day. Leslie immediately noticed how much these efforts helped, but it was when she found out about HUH that things really started to come together. Christopher began to attend HUH meetings after he graduated from Ft. Lewis College in 2019. At the meetings, he found support from those with similar issues. Leslie and her husband attended as well in their roles as caregivers. It was in 2019 that Leslie joined the board.

Today, Christopher is employed by the Eagle County School District as a substitute teacher! He still suffers from chronic migraines and pain, but due to the care he is receiving from a neurologist in Denver and other

avenues he has been pursuing, he has been improving.

Heidi Press's journey to the board of HUH differs from her four colleagues in that she did not have a family member who suffered a traumatic brain injury. It was rather more circuitous. Her family had been coming to the Valley for 30 years, and she had always dreamed of living here one day. On one of her visits prior to moving, she made the acquaintance of Diane Smooke through a mutual friend. Diane knew of Heidi's qualifications through that mutual friend and invited her to a future meeting on the HUH group the next time she visited. That time came in January of 2020 when Heidi's visit coincided with a HUH board meeting. And the rest, as they say, is history.

When covid struck, she had been living in New York City for 17 years and had been employed by the New York City Department of Education as a practicing Occupational Therapist. The pandemic was the final push she needed to make the move to Minturn so she picked up stakes and headed west. She secured a position in her field at the Eagle County Board of Education where she remains today. Within the school system, she is a part of BrainSTEPS Colorado which is a state-wide program that develops and delivers educational services for students who have suffered brain injuries.

Elizabeth and Diane on Colorado Gives Day in December 2022



Today, as a member of the HUH board, her role is one of clinical advisor, rather than victim advocate. Going forward, Heidi's goal is to increase community awareness of TBI and its devastating effects on both victims and their caregivers and to develop ways to make prospective employers more sensitive to the subtle signs of brain injury and to be tolerant of them. She is also a strong advocate, along with her board colleagues, for the addition of a neurologist to the Vail Health staff.

Heads Up for Hope was created from nothing by five people all with different backgrounds, different experiences and different talents, but bound together and determined to improve both the awareness of TBI

and its effects on both the survivors and their families, as well as our community's ability to help those who have suffered TBIs move forward and thrive despite their devastating injuries.

Currently, there are no plans to include TBI treatment or research in the Eagle County Behavioral Health's project currently being developed in Edwards, but it is the fondest hope of the leadership of HUH that they eventually recognize the insidious nature of brain injury, the stress and damage it can cause both survivors and their families, and the importance of facing this tragedy head on. Based on what my eyes were opened up to during my interview with their leadership group, this cannot happen soon enough.

As to what Heads Up for Hope offers the Valley, let me quote from their website, www.headsupforhope.org:

"Heads Up for Hope offers a community support group for you after your brain injury and for your caregivers or family members. A brain injury is a hidden injury, but it can affect all of you. Heads Up for Hope offers a safe, informative atmosphere for sharing frustrations, challenges, and difficulties, with others who are also experiencing similar issues. Within the group, our members offer concrete ideas for managing daily life, exploring

the strategies for alternative ways to do things, celebrating accomplishments and providing reassurances for a better day and a better life."

Currently, HUH has no paid staff. The entire leadership group are volunteers, but volunteers with the drive and determination of the most experienced and learned experts. They intend to change how our little corner of the world deals with TBI, and I strongly recommend that you not stand in their way for that change is coming.

If you or someone you know has suffered a brain injury and is having difficulty managing daily life, please visit their website or give them a call at 976-306-HOPE (4673). And remember their mantra: **YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

If you would like to make a donation to support their efforts, just scan this QR code and let your phone do the rest:

