

Journeys of TBI Recovery

BY OLGA RUKOVETS

Going the Distance: Journeys of Recovery, by Emmy Award-winning filmmaker David L. Brown, is a harrowing but hopeful cinematic look at the “silent epidemic” of traumatic brain injury (TBI) in the United States. Each year, an estimated 1.7 million people sustain a TBI, according to



TBI survivor, Jason Poole, and his twin sister.

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Weaving together the stories of four survivors ranging in age and disability, the documentary is an honest and important peek into the world of people with TBI.

In his proposal for the film, Brown wrote poignantly: “An injury to the brain is an injury to the essential self, which is why one of the film’s therapists explains that TBI survivors ‘have to reinvent who they are.’”

Going the Distance first introduces Jay Waller, an athletic Yale graduate. His plans of attending medical school are permanently sidelined when a brutal assault lands him in the hospital with little chance of survival. After rehabilitation, Waller looks nearly unaltered physically, making his cognitive disability even harder for him to accept. He also

struggles with the verbal “disinhibition” (saying whatever comes to mind) that often results after a TBI.

We next meet Marine Jason Poole. Following an improvised explosive device (IED) blast in Iraq, he is comatose for two months and requires reconstructive facial surgery. An immensely social and handsome guy before the blast, Poole says he has trouble recognizing his new self in the mirror, and his fiancée does not remain with him post-injury.

The third person profiled in the film is Kristen Collins, an independent, young college student who is hit by a drunk truck driver while riding her motorcycle. Collins has to attend anger management classes after the accident to deal with a new part of her personality (anger is a common symptom in TBI survivors), and she feels trapped living at home with her parents again.

Last, we meet Ian McFarland, a 7-year-old boy and surf prodigy who survives an accident that kills both of his parents. His aunt Melissa graciously adopts him and his two siblings. His younger brother and sister sustained only slight injuries from the accident, while Ian suffered a TBI that



Seven-year-old TBI survivor, Ian McFarland, surfs with Ricochet.



Brown films the training for the Lake Tahoe Crossing, a benefit for TBI survivors and the genesis of the film;

leaves him impaired and in a wheelchair. The family is humbled by the support they receive from both friends and strangers.

Through these four people, “we witness how the medical and social safety nets are stretched thin: insurance companies are unwilling to pay for adequate treatment and TBI patients face stigma and ignorance from the general public and families struggle with ‘caregiver burnout’— there are simply not enough caregivers, resources or facilities to treat or even diagnose TBI,” Brown wrote in his proposal for the film.

The film takes us on a painful but triumphant journey with each of these survivors. Though some of their plans change as a result of TBI, we witness each of them achieve important goals by the documentary’s end. Waller enrolls in a Ph.D. program in physical therapy — a field he now knows first-hand. Poole is happily married and volunteering at the

VA childcare center. Collins graduates from nursing school, as she had planned pre-accident. McFarland is making progress in both speech and mobility and gets back on a surfboard.

Although Brown chooses to focus on these stories of perseverance, he reminds viewers that not all TBI patients are so fortunate in their recovery, access to medical care, or social networks.

Brown has produced, written and directed over 80 productions and 13 broadcast documentaries on social, nuclear, environmental, health, technology, and peace and justice issues. His documentaries have received more than 80 international awards, including three Emmys, and have been broadcast on PBS and in 16 countries.



TBI survivor, Jay Waller, and his sister.

For more information on the film, visit:
www.goingthedistance.info | www.DLBfilms.com