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The Messenger

News and information from Mayo Clinic Traumatic Brain Injury **Model System Center**

Time Helps, **Time Heals**

Dan Cooper admits life hasn't turned out exactly as he thought it would.

"Life is good, I'm not any less happy than I wanted to be, my life is simply different than it might have been" he says. Different as a result of a car accident he was involved in on July 28, 2001. Decked out in a tuxedo on the way to usher in a friend's wedding in his home state of Iowa, Dan's vehicle was broadsided by a large motor home. 24-year-old Dan was severely injured with several fractures and a very serious traumatic brain injury and airlifted to Mayo Clinic.

At the time, Dan had recently graduated from Iowa State University in Ames with a degree in Sports Management. Dan attended the University on an athletic scholarship as a runner where he specialized in the 600-meter indoor and the 400-meter hurdles outdoor. He still holds school records. Dan was engaged to be married and was working long hours in sales.

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Dan and Dawn Cooper

Dan cannot recall much about his early days at Mayo Clinic including the 4 weeks he spent in the ICU in a coma or much of what occurred while he was a patient on the rehabilitation unit.

Following inpatient speech, physical, occupational and recreation therapy, Dan participated in outpatient therapies for many months. His Mother moved to town and they lived together in a guest house near St. Mary's hospital while he continued to recover. Dan eventually returned to his parent's home for a short break before starting Mayo Clinic's six month long group oriented Brain Rehabilitation Day Program. He still marvels

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at the fact that he finished the Program almost a year to the day of his accident.

Now what? "I was done with formal rehabilitation but had to change my life and career goals. My engagement was off now and I was not going to be working in sales anymore, the hours were too long" recalls Dan. He spent some time with his parents to retake his driving test in an area that was familiar to him before moving in with his brother for a short while in another part of the state.

While trying to decide what type of job to pursue, Dan volunteered at a local elementary school working in the physical education department and reading to four different classes of kindergarten children.



Dan Cooper, now a licensed massage therapist

As his tolerance for longer days and more responsibility grew, Dan also began to volunteer at the local library. "This was such good practice, I started with just mornings, it really helped improve my endurance and gave me time to think about what I wanted to do".

With time, it became clear to Dan what he wanted to do most was become a massage therapist. "It allowed me to give back." As an athlete himself, Dan was on the receiving end of many a therapeutic massage, as well as a few relaxing massages, and now he wanted the chance to give back, to return the favor to others.

He moved again and enrolled in school. He completed the program and though it took more than one try and some simple accommodations arranged by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB) and the Iowa department of Vocational Rehabilitation, Dan passed the challenging written exam. He is now licensed by the state of Iowa as well as



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Dan and Dawn Cooper, were married in Green Bay, Wisconsin

a professional member of the American Massage Therapy Association. Dan specializes in one-hour massages, ear candling and Energy Balance cellular cleanse therapy. He works part time mostly because it takes time, in this business, to build clientele.

Somewhere along the way, Dan was ready to resume dating. "People move on. I still had friends from before my accident but they were getting married, starting families, beginning new jobs, normal stuff. It was time for me to move on too, it was the thing to do, like everyone else my age."

He eventually met his future wife Dawn through an on-line dating site. Dawn and Dan were married in Green Bay, Wisconsin, after an 18 month engagement.

Dawn and Dan live an active life, a life similar to many people their age. They both work, hang out with each other and with friends, they hope to buy their first home soon, and eventually want to have children. Dan no longer



runs but still loves sports and stays physically active in many other ways (golfing, fishing, swimming, racquetball leagues and shooting baskets).

The serious brain injury he sustained left him with some minor residuals, the most notable being reduced memory for details. The compensation strategies he learned in therapy, including use of a planner, have helped lessen the effect. "Like I said in the beginning, life is good. Healing doesn't end after traumatic brain injury; I want new patients to know that. I know I have made progress every single day for the past five years. Family and faith help. Time helps. Time heals." ■