

In Their Boots, “Fractured Minds”

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Claudia Carreon: I feel sad every time that I look myself in the mirror and I look perfectly competent and I am not. That is why I don't like to look myself in the mirror. I just wish I could continue serving my country, but I can't.

[Music]

Tina Malavé: Welcome to In Their Boots, the show that tells the stories about the lives of military families and service members after their deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. I'm your host Tina Malave.

This season, in addition to bringing you ten new stories about the challenges our military members face after their tours of duty, we are hitting the road on a national tour. Once a month in cities across the country we'll premiere a new documentary film that will inspire us all to help our enlisted men and women, veterans and their families reintegrate into our communities. You can learn more about our tour by clicking the On The Road tab on our website at www.intheirboots.com. And as always if you are a veteran, an active duty service member or a military family who needs services, you can find a list of helpful organizations on the resources page on our website.

A 2008 RAND study reported that nearly 20% of US Service members who have returned from Iraq or Afghanistan currently have what has become the signature injury of these wars, traumatic brain injury or TBI. It's the most common trauma, yet the most complex. In today's story we get to know four soldiers dealing with the constant physical and emotional struggle of TBI in an effort to heal their fractured minds.

Gerard Francisco: A lot of people who have brain injuries look like you and me, but there is an invisible wound and it is not only a wound in the brain, it injures the whole person and we fail to recognize that sometimes. Some people are called the walking wounded because they can walk, they can talk, you will not even know they had the brain injury.

[Music]

Gerard Francisco: Over the next few years even after the war ends, we will see a lot of people with traumatic brain injuries from this war.

Claudia Carreon: At the beginning I really, I don't even know to be and how did I become pregnant. Obviously, you know I become pregnant, but right now as talking about when I become pregnant and then when I was pregnant and I delivered the baby and you know having the baby in my arms and everything, it feels sort of just a story for me. It's just a story.

[Music]

So that's what we do at night. I would look at the pictures. When we first had or watching that or looking at the album, I couldn't recognize people in the pictures, so Sandra she points and she names people in

the pictures.

Sandra Carreon: It feels cold, the water.

Claudia Carreon: Was it cold?

Sandra Carreon: Yeah.

Claudia Carreon: Do you remember that?

Sandra Carreon: Yes, that was cold.

Claudia Carreon: I don't remember how I got injured. I just have the facts. I was in a convoy and it was a head-on collision. Don't having the memory of what happen is a struggle, but what I have is records and people telling me you were in an accident in Iraq, you were in an accident in Iraq, so eventually, of course when people ask me I automatically answer I was in an accident in Iraq.

Daniel Osborne: My name is Sgt. Daniel Osborne with the Army, currently active duty and serving the 1st Cavalry Division. Up until the end of this last deployment I was their senior sniper. Deployed to Iraq three times, I spend most of that time on all three deployments in Baghdad, very interesting country. I have a lot of respect for the people there and their culture.

The math in my line of work is one of the more crucial points because you've got to be able to calculate your distance traveled, being able to estimate the wind, being able to calculate the ballistic arc versus the difference in elevation from where you are shooting or your target is. One of this figures is off can mean the difference between hitting and missing your target altogether.

My math skills aren't nearly as strong as they were that my eyesight isn't nearly as sharp as it used to be and after that head injury I've got double vision that's getting worse, pretty much self explanatory, you don't want to be trying to decide between which between of the two targets you need to hit. In most cases you only get one opportunity to make that shot and in most cases a lot of people are counting on you to pull that bullet where it's supposed to be. Glad I got to do it, although on the other hand I'm glad it's over.

[Music]

Mark DeJaico: With my self esteem being down I was at a party one time. It was like a type of -- it was like a bar -- bar grill type atmosphere. I was talking to a young lady at that time and so we were in a -- we were having a great conversation you know and I was sweating bullets because at that time you know my stuttering was so bad. And then her friend comes along you know and I guess she was a little bit drunk and I'm never going to forget this.

She said -- she sat down right next to her friend and she said why are you talking to this guy, you know why are you talking to this slow guy, you know. He is kind of you know he is kind of slow. So, as soon as she said that of course it just put everything to halt, I got up and I just said you know and it's nice meeting you.

I have been in the civilian world -- I don't know, going about maybe almost four weeks now. I have been to look for a job, I have been searching online, calling -- calling on job ads. To be honest with you it's tough.

[Sound effects]

Robert Briggs: My name is Sgt. Retired Robert Briggs and I served with the 220 -- pardon me, 224th Engineers. I actually joined in '92 and I was there 16 years. My job when we found out was getting deployed I was an equipment operator for the Iowa Department of Transportation. I ran or maintain a lot bladed shoulders, plowed a lot of snow, a lot of ice. Our primary mission in Iraq was to remove roadside bombs from the side of the road as being combat engineers. It was a little bit dangerous.

George Hishaw: There is a skill that's used that basically breaks down traumatic brain injury based on the severity of the injury or what we can say about the severity of the injury the person had. And depending on how poorly they score on that, that person might be classified as mild, moderate, or severe.

Robert Briggs: The day I was injured we were in Ramadi, Iraq. They fired three rockets in on us and I don't remember anything after that. I lost my right eye and I lost this whole half of my skull and I actually left gray matter laying on the sand. Of course if you ask my wife that's my smart half.

Michelle Briggs: You looked at him when you walked in at Walter Reed and you didn't know if it was him or not. He was so blown up. I mean his face was huge, his arms, his legs, his feet, and he was you know on life support.

[Music]

Claudia Carreon: Perla is my sister. She is the baby sister and she has been helping for over a year. And she helps me with everything you know.

Perla Islas Andrade: [Talking in Spanish (translated)] I see myself together with Claudia and the child in 5 years. Unfortunately it has been more than 5 years since she had the accident. The doctors say that there should be some progress, and actually she is on temporary leave from the military and that temporary leave specifies that she be under medical supervision for 5 years, so that the military can determine if she's going to get better or not. So, the 5 year period is significant and it has passed so... I see myself together with Claudia and with the child in 5 years.

Claudia Carreon: I have traumatic brain injury and that means that I have neurological problems, I have memory problems, I have understanding problems. My cognitive level is very poor and my comprehension level is poor.

George Hishaw: One thing you have to remember by traumatic brain injury is that this is not one condition that you can treat. It's not going to go away even after a person has completed years of therapy. There can be problems that persist. There can be new problems that may not even manifest until a few years after a traumatic brain injury.

Mark DeJaico: My brain automatic clicked in to where it got used to you know stuttering. Now, it's just like bone is locked -- like locked down there you know that, okay this is stuttering, you have been stuttering. This is how you are going to be to where you know I got to retrain everything again, how to you know just how to talk. Thank you sir for giving me the opportunity to come see me, I am interested in applying for this position.

[Pause]

Mark DeJaico: Thank you sir for coming to see me, I am interested in applying for this position. I think I'll be a good candidate for your company. I am hard working, goal oriented and dependable. I would...

George Hishaw: Traumatic brain injury normally consists of really two types of injuries and so the initial injury is often a contusion or some type of injury to the surface of the brain. So, you can imagine if this were a brain inside the skull that there is an impact that came from say this area, that there might be an injury to this area of the brain, to the in this case the right parietal area. In addition though, a lot of times because the brain is able to move inside of the skull vault there also might be injury to the opposite side that's called contra-coup injury and so that's one type of injury that can occur in the case of a traumatic brain injury.

Daniel Osborne: In a lot of ways it's kind of like working with the computer that's got a virus. You wanted to do what you tell it to do and no matter how you try to get that computer to perform the task that you are asking it to do, it's just not coming together. The neurological department and the TBI group of Fort Hood selected me to go to Project Victory. I'm very lucky to be able to come down here and benefit from this treatment.

[Music]

Female Healthcare Provider: Good and we'll see how much of that you remember. Alright, you ready for this?

Daniel Osborne: Yeah.

Female Healthcare Provider: Okay. Now, you'll get one shot. Here you go.

Daniel Osborne: It can be really confusing, confusing with this type of injury because when you look in the mirror it doesn't seem like anything is wrong with you. It's not like physical therapy where if you physically work harder at it you can get stronger. You don't see any muscles re-growing, you don't see bones mending. It's almost like being in your own local prison inside your head because nobody else knows what's going on.

[Music]

Perla Islas Andrade: [Talking in Spanish (translated)] What she tries to do at times, because she forgets, as time goes by she forgets... When we tell her about our dad or when we tell her any story, what she does is build memories. It's not that she remembers, she builds the memories and according to what we tell her she remembers. Time passes and if we don't tell her again she'll forget. Then we have to tell her again and again and she builds other memories.

Claudia Carreon: Not too long ago, I was relying my activities and my appointments and my notes on a notebook, on a paper agenda. And I just told to my doctors that I -- you know it gets to the point where you feel -- I feel sick and tired of the whole situation and I told them that I wanted to go -- that I wanted to make a change in my life and see if I could have handle something more convenient for me to carry around.

[Music]

Robert Briggs: With my short term memory problems I will -- like if I have an appointment or something, I will actually tell my wife about it and she will write it down.

(playing charades) I saw in the Internet this service this -- it's not on a telephone, it's not -- they make safe on your gun. Babies do it when they are young.

Female Guest: Google.

Male Guest: Yeah, oh crap.

Female Health Provider: I'm going to give you a time restriction, 30 seconds to describe that one -- yeah?

Mark DeJaico: Thirty?

Female Health Provider: Ready -- go.

Mark DeJaico: Spiritual. Ghost. Dead -- ghost that would live on and on. They also call that as...

Female Health Provider: Spiritual ghost like an angel?

Mark DeJaico: That would live on and on or people describe Dracula as what since he cannot, he cannot pass away.

Female Health Provider: Eternal?

Mark DeJaico: Yes.

Female Health Provider: Very good.

Mark DeJaico: That's another thing to a memory loss and this remembering things because I am normally on point of thing. I'm -- nobody had to tell me anything you know twice and like my girlfriend would say, or other people would tell me, you know what Mark, you already told me that already.

[Music]

Daniel Osborne: I'm going to have you know re-teach myself with that right now, getting my brain to recognize the symbols and remember the rules. Right now, I'm leading towards engineering and so, but right now I am going to concentrate on getting a core courses done and getting into the groove of college and figuring out what techniques need to be used to work around it.

[Sound effects]

Gerard Francisco: When someone has a traumatic brain injury it does not only affect that person. It will also affect the family, the friends, the caregivers, the people around that person. We always say in my field that if you've had the brain injury, your entire family, your social network, your loved ones have the brain injury as well.

Robert Briggs: Some of my symptoms that are not physical I actually have a short term memory loss. Not all the time, but if you ask my wife it's a lot more than what I realize.

Michelle Briggs: A lot of people think I'm mean to him, but you know that's what helped him get through this you know. He didn't want to be in a wheelchair, he didn't want to be in bed for the rest of his life, so I just keep pushing him.

Robert Briggs: That I just don't even argue with my wife anymore because she knows and that's what it takes for somebody who -- like me who is dealing with mental problems and she is on the outside looking in, so she knows.

[Talking in foreign language]

Claudia Carreon: I think our relationship and the connection that we have right now is being hard work on her end and mine because Sandra, she definitely knows that I am her mother and I talk to her very often, "I love you, I love you, I love you," because I want her to know that once upon a time mommy didn't know about her. Even though she was there, mommy didn't know about her, but I want her to know that mommy has always been there for her and she always will be despite the fact that I have a memory problem you know. I have to face it. I do, I do.

Daniel Osborne: My wife has been, she is getting the world the knowledge on what's going on with this and what could be expected down the road. So, she's just not sitting on the sideline, she's been able to be a big part of my recovery from this.

To help me day to day, my wife, she is constantly challenging me and motivating me to continue to work harder, helping me to get my head where it needs to be to tackle the big challenge going to college. Sometimes she is there to kick me in the butt when I'm feeling down about things, issues that I'm having and when the frustration builds up, she's definitely made our relationship stronger. She's been a huge help. I wouldn't have been able to do this without her. I would have been frustrated with everything and just given up.

Gerard Francisco: The last time you were here you were also having trouble finding words.

Mark DeJaico: Yes.

Gerard Francisco: And what I notice now is that you still stumble a little bit, but you eventually got the words. Whereas, before...

Mark DeJaico: Before, I'm not able to....

Gerard Francisco: You were not able to say the things.

Mark DeJaico: I don't ever think you could even -- hardly understand me doctor before.

Gerard Francisco: So, have you talked to your family since?

Mark DeJaico: Yes.

Gerard Francisco: Have they said the same thing? Have they noticed your speech is different?

Mark DeJaico: My mom was crying when she was talking to me, like she was talking to me -- I normally talk to my mom maybe five minutes.

Gerard Francisco: Right.

Mark DeJaico: But I talk to my mom until my cell phone died. So, she's happy.

Gerard Francisco: Okay. That's good. I'm so glad to hear that.

Mark DeJaico: Yeah.

Gerard Francisco: I'm glad that you are getting better.

Mark DeJaico: It's a blessing. It's just a blessing I feel coming to Project Victory. A blessing that you know, you are being able to, you was able to see me.

Gerard Francisco: But give yourself credit because you worked hard. This would not have worked if you had not committed your time and your energy to getting better.

Mark DeJaico: Yes doctor. Do I think if I'm ever going to be cured? I would hope so. Head injury right now is I guess the treatment is still fairly new. The military in general actually finally looking at it you know like okay. This is actually you know, this is actually happening. Hopefully in the future, hopefully, I am praying that I would, that I will get better.

Robert Briggs: I'm hoping to start speaking in front of, in churches. I'll start probably in my church that I volunteered to talk and tell them my story and to strive to inspire people. You know, if I can do it anybody can do it, just because you can't walk, just because you only have one arm you know, that's not the end of the world. There's no reason to get down about it because there's a whole lot more to life than just sitting around feeling sorry for yourself.

Daniel Osborne: I'm going to be getting medically separated from the army in the next couple of months. So, I'm going to miss the life a lot, but I understand that it's my time to move on.

New set of goals and challenges ahead of me. Being in a position now where I can actually pursue a college education that's pretty big for me. Doing that with the TBI just adds to the challenge. So, we don't look at it as added problems as being insurmountable, it's just better training.

Claudia Carreon: I think it's important for that community to realize that we should not judge people by the way they look because I certainly -- I even myself look myself in the mirror and I say how is it possible that I can't accomplish one task in one day, but I think we need to get educated on not only being compassionate with those that are missing a limb, but also with those that look perfectly normal and wish that they didn't have a problem.

[Music]

Tina Malavé: Welcome back to In Their Boots. Today we are joined by Army Specialist Retired Claudia Carreon and the Director of Project Victory Shawn Brossart. Hello ladies, thank you so much for joining us today. We appreciate it. Can we begin by -- can you explain for us what TBI actually is and how that can affect a returning soldier?

Shawn Brossart: Of course. TBI is a Traumatic Brain Injury and how that occurs is usually an insult to the brain that can happen due to a gunshot wound, it can happen through a stroke. We are seeing typically with the OIF/OEF military is that it's an IED blast and they receive an insult to the brain through some blast exposure.

And what we are seeing with our soldiers and how it affects them is really it affects all areas of life. It affects people physically, their balance is off. They have more difficulty doing things physically with strength and range of motion, cognitive ability, they have more difficulty with their thinking skills, such as memory or paying attention and then of course emotionally. Often, people experience depression and anxiety after an experience such as that.

Tina Malavé: Right. Now it seems like it's only been in the last few years that TBI is really become widely recognized. What do you think has kind of sparked this new realization?

Shawn Brossart: You know I think it's kind of sad to say, because I am sad to hear that Bob Woodruff

had to go through what he had to go through, but I believe that he brought a lot to the spotlight with his injury and the show that followed subsequently. I mean, it made a big difference in the traumatic brain injury to the world and it really brought things to the forefront in the American culture.

Tina Malavé: Right. Now, Claudia we have been watching a little bit of your story. At what point did you realize that there was something very wrong?

Claudia Carreon: I think I did -- never far from today. Before I didn't know, now I know that I have TBI, but I can't tell you before because my situation happened so different. I have memory problems and my memory problems are from the beginning. I cannot even remember what happened two days ago.

So, if I had a TBI back in 2003, all that I know is that I got a TBI in 2003 and then I had in 2004, 2005, up to the present, but we have been working on it, then certainly I've been, I am better than when I was back in 2003 and years back from today.

Tina Malavé: Do you know or do you remember or has your family told you, was this something that was a gradual loss for you or was it that you woke up from the accident and everything was different.

Claudia Carreon: For what I know -- to be honest I don't even know the story. I know that I was in this accident. I don't know what happened they kept me on duty, then I had some problems being in the military and I was demoted because I was disobeying orders due to my retention of information, which I didn't know I have a problem. And then I was transferred back to the State, then they treated me and then they released me and then my families thought that I really had a problem. I kept going to the VA. I was getting lost from my house to the Circle K then I became pregnant. I didn't know I was pregnant, so I was on news everyday. I give birth and I don't know that I -- up to this point you know I can't remember being pregnant and giving birth. And finally, they put me into an inpatient program and that really, really helped me out because they taught me how to remember, how to realize that I was a new person, that I had a problem, that I had a daughter and that I had been in an accident that cost me some serious problems with my neurological system.

Tina Malavé: I can't even imagine what this must be like for you and your family, what is the hardest part for you in all of this?

Claudia Carreon: Freedom. For me it's very frustrating, wake up everyday and realize that I don't have the freedom to go wherever I want to go because I will end up lost. And I don't have the freedom to be with my daughter by myself because I may you know I can jeopardize her safety and my own safety. So, my mother and my sister they both alternate to be with me and help me out.

Tina Malavé: Right.

Claudia Carreon: I don't want to say take care of me because I'm 35 years old, but certainly...

Tina Malavé: They assist you.

Claudia Carreon: I do need their help.

Tina Malavé: Well ladies, we wish you both so much success. Thank you very much for being with us today. We really appreciate it.

The story continues on our website where you can catch more of my conversation with Claudia Carreon and Shawn Brossart. And as always, if you're a service member in need of help or if you would like to become a volunteer, just go to the resources page on our website where you can find a list of helpful

organizations. I'm Tina Malave, please join us again next time on In Their Boots and that you for watching.

[Music]