

## BrainLine Talks With Michael Paul Mason

Produced by: Victoria Tilney McDonough and Brian King, BrainLine.org, WETA

Video Link: <http://www.brainline.org/content/multimedia.php?id=806>

### Unlikely Heroes

**Michael Paul Mason:** Rob Rabe, the early '80s was this, you know, quintessential American, young jock. You know, he was the ... he was a point guard on his basketball. He was the start quarterback of his high school. And shortly after graduation, he gets in this terrible car accident where he gets, you know, in a collision involving a drunk driver. And he actually I believe was pronounced dead at the scene and then begins making some noises and eventually his life is saved at a hospital nearby. However, when he comes out of this lengthy coma, his family learns that he doesn't have the ability to move anymore. He had suffered a brain stem injury. And so this impaired his motor abilities.

And so, he went through a very lengthy recovery of a couple of years in a hospital. And this is actually unheard of now. Most people, their insurance simply doesn't allow for a couple of years time and rehabilitation. But that's exactly what he received. In his home state of Iowa at that time, there were no resources to speak of. So his mother advocated with many other families who were in similar situations. And together, this group of families actually created such a powerful network of advocacy that they got a rehabilitation center, a brain injury rehab, up and off the ground in Iowa. Now it's considered one of the premiere brain injury rehabs in the entire U.S.

But this rehab was in part created because of Rob's injury. Many years later, Rob became a director at his own rehabilitation center in Colorado. And incidentally, his mother contracted cancer. And one of the few places available to her was Rob's Center. So he ended up extending life, you know, life giving services to his own mother who had given just the same type of care and love decades earlier. He was in turn there for her when her life needed help.

In the case of Rob Rabe, the single most important factor for his growth and recovery and his rehabilitation and his productive life has been his family. Time and time again, this is what I see in the lives of brain injury survivors. Those people who have at least someone who loves them. You know, it maybe just a friend. But if they have somebody, their level of outcome will far exceed that of someone who doesn't have any family member or loved ones.

**Michael Paul Mason:** I believe an individual can make a tremendous amount of change. You know, even within their community. I think that's essentially reform is going to happen and how I've seen reform happen. In your own city, you can advocate aggressively. You can be the squeaky wheel. You can go to people who provide services or who are specialists and ask them for advice. You can contact your state head injury administrator and volunteer to sit in on advisory councils. You can do very practical things as well. You can give brochures to the coach your child's football team or volleyball team and let them understand how to react to a concussion. You know, these simple educating things.

I mean, one of the most frustrating things about brain injuries is that a huge majority of them could have been avoided. And I can guarantee you that of the 1.6 million people that sustained brain injury, none of them had anticipated it. Not a single person is ever prepared for brain injury. And that's also one of the harrowing things about the injury.

**Michael Paul Mason:** There's one case that I've been working on, a young woman with a seizure disorder. Her stepmother and I have been talking now for about three and a half or four years now. The young woman still has not received the kind of help that she needs. But this mother contacts me almost

religiously about once a month asking me if anything has changed. Asking me who she may be able to talk to to make things different for her daughter. You know, giving me updates as to what is going on. I mean, she is in a very difficult situation. She's in a very poor state that has very few supports for her. And she's a single parent taking care of this stepdaughter of hers. And this essentially is her life. I mean, she is a full-time caregiver on top of being fully employed. And nobody's telling this woman thank you or paying her for any of her services. If anything, it's costing her everything. And all she really wants is for her daughter to get better. And she hasn't given up hope. I respect that.

**Michael Paul Mason:** I've seen heroes in the most unlikely places. I mean, I do draw my encouragement from family members. I mean, talk about Sisyphean struggles. I mean, these people who care day in and day out for a severely injured person it's just the amount of devotion and love that they exhibit is uncommon. It's really amazing to see the selflessness at work there.