

Far From Home, Injured Vet Is Never Alone

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Video Link: <http://www.brainline.org/content/multimedia.php?id=3289>

RyAnne Noss: Do you see yourself in the mirror? Come on. Give us a thumbs up if you see yourself. Communicate with us. Give us a thumbs up.

Rehab Specialist: This is up and this is down. And what I want you to do is lift it up and hold it up.

Narrator: Scot Noss is minimally conscious. In simple terms, that means he's awake and aware. But he can't communicate.

Rehab Specialist: Lift it all the way up.

Narrator: What it really means is no one really knows how much Scot knows. This isn't what people think of when they think about injured soldiers. Anthony Thompson is a Navy Corpsman. Three years ago, he was on his second deployment in Iraq; and a suicide bomber blew up his post.

Ivonne Thompson: This particular dump truck had been loaded down with what they estimated at 3,000 pounds of explosives. So the guy drove the dump truck under their post station and detonated.

Narrator: Five or ten years ago, people weren't surviving these kinds of injuries. Scot Noss is an Army Ranger. He served eight deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan before he was injured in a helicopter crash.

RyAnne Noss: We had a wonderful marriage, full of respect and love and happiness. I mean, it's testimony I'm still with him. We wanted a football team. We wanted lot of little boys running around. You know, I wanted a career. But, most importantly, I lost my soul mate.

Narrator: There's no darker moment than the one that brought RyAnne Noss and Ivonne Thompson together. They met within months of their husbands' injuries, two young wives dealing with unspeakable tragedy. They formed an instant bond.

RyAnne Noss: Ivonne is the one person that I can say knows exactly what I'm thinking or worried about or going through. I know she'll laugh at this if she hears it; but she really does ground me. She really has helped me out a lot. I look up to her strength. Just don't tell her I said that, though [laughing].

Narrator: When there are two wars going on, being a military wife takes a certain kind of toughness. But nothing could prepare Ivonne and RyAnne for this.

RyAnne Noss: They took me back in the ICU room and they're like, RyAnne, he does not look like himself. You've got to be strong. And I'm going, Just let me see my man. I looked around the curtain and walked in there; and the sight haunts my dreams three years later. I have never fainted before in my life, and I took one look at him and I was on the floor. I fainted.

Ivonne Thompson: I looked at him and I lost it. I completely lost it. He was so bloated from all the fluids that they were pumping him with. He was intubated. He was on a ventilator. He was completely lifeless.

Narrator: At the time, Ivonne was pregnant with her first child. And giving birth to their son AJ was bittersweet.

Ivonne Thompson: On the one side, it was wonderful because the last gift that Anthony ever gave me was finally there. And on, this other hand, Anthony wasn't there like he was supposed to be. Hi, AJ! Can you say hi to AJ? Say hi to AJ.

Narrator: RyAnne stepped in as a second parent to AJ. She's and AJ call each other bubby.

RyAnne Noss: Hey, darling. Hey, bubby! Hey!

Child: Bubby!

RyAnne Noss: [Laughing] At a moment where you just didn't think that you could ever laugh and love and have those emotions, you know, her baby boy was right there to help you realize that you could feel those emotions again.

Narrator: It's been about three years since Scot and Anthony were injured. RyAnne and Ivonne fought hard to get them into the Kessler Institute in West Orange, one of the leading research and rehab facilities for traumatic brain injury. Kessler is known for its mix of traditional, holistic, and experimental treatments. There are several hours of intensive physical therapy every day.

Jonathan Fellus: We need to really get aggressive. Because this is perhaps the most challenging patient population in all of medicine. The time has really come that we need to try multiple treatments in combination simultaneously.

Rehab Specialist: Stretch it out, Anth.

Anthony Thompson: Oh.

Ivonne Thompson: There's your stretch.

[Laughter]

Ivonne Thompson: Ah.

Narrator: In the three months since they've been at Kessler, RyAnne and Ivonne say they've seen measurable improvements: more body awareness, more movement. It's not the miracle everyone wishes for, but it defies the common wisdom that traumatic brain injury patients stop improving after the first year.

Jonathan Fellus: Ultimately, kind of the Holy Grail here is to establish some kind of sense of communication, however rudimentary that is.

Ivonne Thompson: Are you pushing?

Jonathan Fellus: If you can maximize the potential in the injured brain, then maybe you can turn an inconsistent response to a consistent response. And that means the world to the families.

Ivonne Thompson: I would love if he could just have some form of communication, even if it's yes. You know, if he's uncomfortable, Anthony, are you uncomfortable? Or, you know, anything, any kind of functional communication.

Narrator: Living with someone who's minimally conscious is an emotional roller coaster. Ivonne and RyAnne haven't been employed for years. They've been living out of group homes and motels, separated from their families.

Ivonne Thompson: I never in a million years ever even fathomed this being an outcome of him going over there. I didn't even know what traumatic brain injury was until he was injured.

RyAnne Noss: You see wives leaving soldiers with less injuries than Scot. I've witnessed the divorce papers on the side table in ICU. It just breaks my heart. It makes me want to take all of those soldiers home with me and just love and take care of them.

Narrator: It's the little moments that keep RyAnne and Ivonne going. Ivonne remembers the first time she put AJ in the bed with Anthony.

Ivonne Thompson: Usually, when I stretch his arm out, eventually he always gets it right back here. This day, I stretched his arm out and then I laid AJ in that little nook. And his arm did not move. It was like he knew that his son was there in his arms and he did not flinch. And AJ just, you know, laid there all swaddled up. And it was -- it was awesome.

Jonathan Fellus: It must be something very deeply human, because I've rarely if ever, seen

someone just throw their hands up in the air and say, "I give up. No more hope." I just don't see that.

RyAnne Noss: I always want him to realize that he is safe and not alone. And so I'll crawl into bed with him and just reassure him that I'm there for him. And it's nice. I know that he knows that I'm there. And it's just a -- it's just our time, a chance for us to be, in that thirty minutes to an hour, a couple.

[Silence]