

THE CHALLENGE!



Building Survivor
Involvement in
Maine and Beyond
PAGE 10

Building a
National Plan
of Action
PAGE 9

MEET OUR **ADVOCACY & AWARENESS AMBASSADORS**

PAGE 3

A Commuter's
Brain Injury
Journey
PAGE 13

2025 Luminary
of the Year
PAGE 14

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Advocacy & Awareness	
Ambassadors Class of 2026	3
The National Brain Injury Action Plan	9
Get on Board: Building Survivor Involvement in Maine and Beyond	10
Donor Profile	13
Luminary of the Year 2025	14
Affiliate News	17
Event Calendar	22

Greetings,

March is Brain Injury Awareness Month, and each year, the Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA) marks the start of it with our annual trip to Washington, D.C. These visits give brain injury advocates, survivors, and their loved ones valuable face time with their Congressional representatives and their staffers as they explain the need for federal funding and legislation that will improve the quality of life for people with brain injury.



Our community has rallied for many brain injury issues in the past, including reauthorization of the Traumatic Brain Injury Act and funding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s TBI program and the TBI Model Systems of Care. This year, we are leading for the creation of a National Brain Injury Action Plan – a national strategy to improve treatment, research, and support.

Currently, there are no national standards, there is no guarantee of follow-up care, and there is no single roadmap for addressing brain injury in America. Providers lack consistent guidelines on screening, diagnosis, and treatment for brain injury, and proven treatments like rehabilitation and care coordination often aren’t covered by insurance. Our federal programs and services aren’t working from the same playbook – brain injuries and related conditions aren’t consistently tracked, hiding the full scope of the problem. You can learn more about our National Brain Injury Action Plan and what we’ll be proposing during our meetings with legislators on page 9 of this issue.

But Brain Injury Awareness Month encompasses more than our efforts on Capitol Hill. At its heart, it’s about spreading awareness – to our families, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates – about the reality of living with a brain injury, and inviting them to join our movement. As we found out last year when we conducted a public opinion poll to determine the average American’s awareness of brain injury, there’s quite a bit they don’t understand. To help improve the public’s awareness and understanding of brain injury, BIAA, along with other brain injury organizations and advocates, released a joint statement aimed at improving how brain injuries are discussed and understood. “Communicating about Brain Injury” was developed collaboratively by healthcare providers, researchers, and people with lived experience, and includes not only a definition of brain injury and its causes, but includes 12 things to consider when talking about brain injury. The document is available on BIAA’s website, and this Brain Injury Awareness Month, I encourage you to read it and share it with your community. I also invite you to take action this Brain Injury Awareness Month: join us in our advocacy efforts, participate in a fundraiser, take advantage of our educational webinars or certification programs, or get involved with your state affiliate or chapter.

Visit biausa.org/awareness26 to get started.

Sincerely,



Rick Willis, President and CEO
Brain Injury Association of America



ADVOCACY & AWARENESS AMBASSADORS

The Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA) is proud to announce our new Advocacy and Awareness Ambassador program, welcoming 20 advocates into the inaugural class.

The Advocacy and Awareness Ambassador program is a training and engagement program for advocates who want to elevate their advocacy and public awareness efforts. This national initiative will train and empower a grassroots network of brain injury advocates. The 2026 class of Ambassadors includes brain injury survivors, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and advocates representing a range of backgrounds, experiences, and regions.

“The 20 inaugural members of our Advocacy and Awareness Ambassador Program exemplify what it means to be a voice for brain injury,” said Rick Willis, President and CEO, BIAA. “From the survivors who use their lived experience to improve awareness and understanding, to the caregivers who advocate on behalf of their loved ones, to the professionals who dedicate their careers to supporting members of the brain injury community, this cohort of passionate, informed individuals inspires us to live our vision of ensuring that everyone in the U.S. who sustains a brain injury is recognized, treated, and accepted.”

“

**THE 20 INAUGURAL MEMBERS OF OUR ADVOCACY AND
AWARENESS AMBASSADOR PROGRAM EXEMPLIFY WHAT
IT MEANS TO BE A VOICE FOR BRAIN INJURY,”**

RICK WILLIS, PRESIDENT AND CEO, BIAA

MEET THE CLASS OF 2026



Jira Banfield

NEW YORK

Before becoming an advocate for brain injury, Jira Banfield served as a Congressional Communications Director, where she honed her expertise in strategic messaging, public policy communication, and media engagement.

Jira's journey took a personal turn after her sister sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Her experience as her sister's caregiver opened her eyes to the challenges survivors and families face following brain injury. That experience became a defining moment which transformed Jira's career focus from traditional communications to advocacy and policy change for people with disabilities.

Today, Jira remains the primary caregiver for her sister and looks forward to being a BIAA Advocacy and Awareness Ambassador, where she can use her voice and skills to champion inclusion, accessibility, and empowerment for the entire brain injury community.

Tara Buggie

NEW JERSEY

Tara Buggie is a 28-year survivor of severe TBI sustained while returning home from a TBI benefit in college. After a subsequent year of rigorous physical and cognitive rehabilitation, Tara went on to earn her J.D., and practiced education and insurance defense law before transitioning to brain injury advocacy.

A fundraiser for the Brain Injury Alliance of New Jersey and leader in its advocacy group, Tara was awarded the Alliance's Miriam (Mimi) Goldman Positive Achievement Award in 2023. Tara has served as Chair of the New Jersey Advisory Council on Traumatic Brain Injury's Survivor Board since 2022. She looks forward to her work in the Advocacy and Awareness Ambassadors Program.

Patty Byrnes

PENNSYLVANIA

A healthcare lobbyist by day, working with Medicaid, LTSS, and individuals with disabilities, Patty Byrnes became more connected to BIAA following her stroke in May 2023. The stroke resulted in a concussion, trauma-induced seizures, and long-term effects, including stability issues, light sensitivity, slow reaction times, and overstimulation. With her background and experience, Patty wants people to understand more about brain injury and the recovery associated with it.

As a member of the Advocacy and Awareness Ambassadors Program, Patty hopes to advocate and provide education so decisionmakers understand the complexities and need for supports after a brain injury.

Melissa Carmen

PENNSYLVANIA

Thirty-two years ago, Melissa Carmen was a high school sophomore on her way home when her car crashed into a telephone pole.

Melissa sustained a severe TBI in the crash, and needed physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. After being discharged from rehab, Melissa says she experienced emotional volatility, behavioral challenges, sensory overload, cognitive impairments, and vestibular dysfunction. Despite these challenges, she returned to school, where she pushed herself to graduate with honors.

Today, Melissa is a mother to a recent high school graduate, and has become her advocate – her daughter, too, has sustained a brain injury. Melissa knows that road, she says. She's walked it herself and now she walks it beside her daughter.

Chad Childs

KANSAS

In June 2014, Chad Childs sustained a diffuse axonal injury brain injury. While he says he has had great jobs and work experience, good health insurance, and a wonderful support system, recovery has been difficult.

Today, Chad is the Prevention Initiatives Manager for the Community Engagement Institute, and a member of the Trauma-Informed Systems of Care and Early Childhood Initiatives teams. He is also a Licensed Clinical Marriage and Family Therapist with over 20 years of management and leadership experience in the mental and behavioral healthcare field and the fields of higher education, child welfare, and prevention.

Chad serves on several boards and committees, including the Kansas Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health, Kansas Mental Health Coalition, and the Kansas Balance of State Continuum of Care (Steering Committee).

Charrisse Coates

ARKANSAS

Charrisse Coates is a caregiver, writer, advocate, artist, historian, and more. She and her husband, Victor, began their brain injury journey in 2010 when he sustained a TBI. Charrisse admits since being catapulted on this path, her family has laughed, cried, run – and sometimes hobbled – but are blessed to have not given up.

Charrisse has been a caregiver to survivors of all types of acquired brain injuries and is excited about serving, learning, and contributing to BIAA as a member of the Advocacy and Awareness Ambassadors Program. Brain injury advocacy is important to Charrisse because she believes her and her family's experience, along with their gifts and talents, are part of how they have been equipped to serve others in the brain injury community.

Lyndee Crawford

TEXAS

As a speech-language pathologist, Lyndee Crawford has worked diligently to improve her understanding of brain injuries in order to provide quality care to her patients. Two years ago, Lyndee became a Certified Brain Injury Specialist, and says the connections she has made and the progress she has witnessed from those affected has been nothing short of a miracle. For professionals like her, who provide services and care to members of the brain injury community, Lyndee believes it is important to gain a better understanding of those affected in order to serve them and provide better outcomes.

Lyndee says she is looking forward to connecting with others who are passionate about brain injury awareness and learning more about what can be done to better serve the brain injury community.

Carrie Ditto

FLORIDA

Carrie Ditto is an advocate for an individual affected by brain injury, bringing personal insight and experience in supporting a loved one through her recovery. She is committed to advancing awareness, education, and access to resources for the brain injury community. Through involvement with BIAA, Carrie works to promote best practices in care and support, helping individuals and families navigate the challenges associated with brain injury.

Brain injury advocacy and awareness are important to Carrie, because they ensure that individuals and families affected by brain injury have access to the resources, support, and understanding they need. She says she is inspired by BIAA's commitment to empowering individuals and families affected by brain injury, providing support, education, and hope when it's needed most.





Brinda Dungan, M.Ed., CBIS

ALABAMA

Brinda Dungan is a clinical rehabilitation counselor-in-training and Certified Brain Injury Specialist with both personal and professional connections to the brain injury community. After sustaining a TBI, Brinda transformed her recovery into a lifelong mission of advocacy, education, and empowerment for survivors and families.

Brinda is a Resource Navigator with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services Traumatic Brain Injury and Spinal Cord Injury Program, where she helped design and build the state's Resource Navigation system to improve service coordination and access to care for individuals with neurological injuries. Brinda also serves as the Community Resource Coordinator for the Georgia RSVP Clinic.

Beyond her clinical roles, Brinda contributes her expertise through statewide advisory and leadership positions, including the Alabama Head Injury Task Force and the UAB TBI Model Systems Advisory Board.

Claudia Gonzalez

TEXAS

Claudia Gonzalez is a recent Ph.D. graduate who earned her degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in August 2025.

Previously, Claudia was an high school athletic trainer, where she observed misconceptions about concussions by athletes, their families, and professionals. She understands the need for athletic trainers and health care professionals to have evidence-based research and resources so that athletes, affected individuals, and their families can have the resources they need when struggling with physical and mental health or other issues stemming from brain injuries. Claudia has also been an ambassador for the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center.

Leili Hashemi

CALIFORNIA

In 2020, at the age of 24, Leili Hashemi experienced a stroke. At the time, she had just finished her undergraduate degree and was applying to medical school. For the first two years following her stroke, Leili was fully dedicated to her health and recovery efforts – something she says felt like a full-time job. After that acute and intense phase, Leili began to look outward, seeking ways to support the brain injury community and strengthen her connections to it.

Leili's personal brain injury journey is her biggest inspiration to support BIAA and its work. "BIAA represents the meaningful work that I aspire to accomplish," she says. "I believe its work is extremely valuable to help survivors not just survive but thrive."

Darcy Keith

INDIANA

Darcy Keith is an internationally recognized, award-winning professional speaker and expert on brain injury and overcoming adversity. Darcy has a passion for helping other individuals who experience brain injury to live their best lives. In addition to serving on BIAA's Brain Injury Advisory Council since 2021, she serves on an advisory committee to Ohio State University's Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

Darcy has appeared on various television and radio venues around the country, including ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX. In addition to working full-time as a Business Analyst for Liberty Mutual Insurance, Darcy is a contributing author to six books and has published several CDs and DVDs.



Sofia Lois Monroe

NEVADA

Sofia Lois Monroe is an Emmy-nominated producer, entrepreneur, philanthropist, and advocate. As the founder of Daymaker Productions, a company merging storytelling and social impact, Sofia creates content and initiatives that educate, uplift, entertain, and empower others.

Sofia's connection to brain injury is personal – her sister sustained a TBI in a car accident, and her mother experienced head injuries before and after being diagnosed with stage 4 brain cancer. Sofia became one of her primary caregivers, gaining firsthand insight into the challenges survivors and families face.

Sofia's own experiences include getting concussions from a snowboarding accident and car accidents, which influenced her understanding of brain injury recovery, PTSD recovery, and mental health. As a result, Sofia wants to share her story, as well as BIAA's education, resources, and more in the hopes of helping others who have TBIs or loved ones with brain injury.

Carey Moore

KENTUCKY

Carey Moore is an Orientation and Mobility certified professional who has spent the past nine years working to support individuals affected by brain injury through advocacy, education, and outreach. A year ago, her perspective shifted in a profound and personal way when her husband became a brain injury survivor. Experiencing the realities of brain injury from the inside gave her a new level of empathy and insight.

This experience strengthened her resolve to advocate for survivors and their families with even greater compassion and understanding. Carey has seen firsthand how important it is to have access to resources, community, and hope. She now approaches her work with a dual lens: one shaped by years of professional experience, and one informed by the intimate journey of caregiving and resilience.



Nicole Morrison

INDIANA

In April 2012, Nicole Morrison was on her daily run when she was hit by a car. She landed on her head and neck, which resulted in a fractured C1, C2, and C3 vertebrae, as well as a fractured skull which caused a subdural and epidural hemorrhage. As a result, Nicole had to relearn daily tasks such as standing, walking, and talking.

Nicole says she was fortunate to have a medical team that felt like family. As a patient, and in the months and years after, Nicole was invited to brain injury support group meetings, which gave her a chance to spend time with other brain injury survivors. She learned about BIAA and the Brain Injury Association of Indiana, and attended conferences that helped her learn that she was not alone.

"I am not ashamed to admit that I am guilty of misunderstanding what a brain injury and a disability are. If it took something happening to me personally to open my eyes to the importance of brain injury and disability awareness and advocacy, then I will use my talents as a leader and a crusader to get the correct, needed, and vital information shared with the general public," she says.

Dede Norungolo

SOUTH CAROLINA

As a survivor of a moderate TBI more than 25 years ago, Dede Norungolo's connection to brain injury has evolved through every stage of recovery. These experiences, paired with her pursuit of a new career as a certified rehabilitation counselor, have shaped her professional identity. Her journey with brain injury has guided her toward becoming a disability specialist and mental health professional dedicated to helping others access resources, identify transferable skills, and discover their own voices as advocates and allies.

As a board member of the Brain Injury Association of South Carolina, Dede has had the opportunity to participate in affiliate conferences and attend the National Brain Injury Conference and Awareness Day for two consecutive years.

Brain injury advocacy and awareness are important to Dede because she understands the gaps in services and systems extended to brain injury survivors, who often face lifetime, chronic mental and physical illnesses post-injury.



Frank Notaro

PENNSYLVANIA

In November 1991, Frank Notaro was in a car accident that resulted in a brain injury and changed his life. At the time, Frank was not aware of BIAA or its state affiliates; he was trying to navigate recovery and life after brain injury on his own, without realizing there were organizations out there to help people like him. In 2014, he discovered the Brain Injury Association of Pennsylvania (BIAPA) – a discovery he refers to as a game-changer. Through BIAPA, Frank found resources, including support programs, connections, and funding opportunities.

“My mission is to help make sure that information, resources, and understanding about brain injury are accessible everywhere, not just in certain pockets of the country,” Frank says. “By sharing lived experience, promoting collaboration, and pushing for more awareness, I hope to make a real difference in how people think about and respond to brain injury across all levels.”

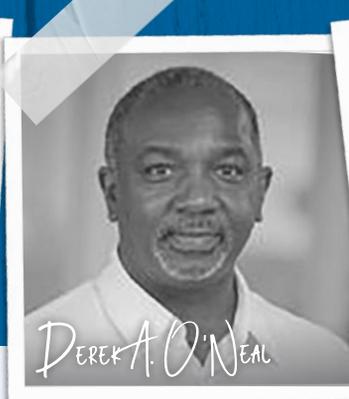
Derek A. O’Neal

VIRGINIA

Derek A. O’Neal is a brain injury survivor and retired Army veteran. After his military career, he served as a leader in many business organizations in Indiana and Michigan before a car crash in 2004 curtailed his career.

Derek has served as a board member of the Brain Injury Associations of Michigan and Virginia, and now serves on the board of the Virginia Brain Injury Council. In addition, he is a motivational speaker as a member of the Brain Injury Services of Springfield, Virginia Speaker’s Bureau.

As a survivor, brain injury advocacy and awareness is one of the most important reasons that Derek has continued to participate in and contribute to BIAA initiatives.



Jenna Redington

ILLINOIS

In 2022, Jenna Redington’s life changed when her partner and the father of her then-three-week-old daughter sustained an anoxic brain injury. He is disabled, blind, and has short-term memory issues, and Jenna has been his caregiver ever since.

“If he can wake up every day and try to make a difference then so can I,” Jenna says. “He inspires me to do better every single day and continues to bring positivity into my life even after such tragedy. Just like BIAA brings hope to survivors across the country.”

Resources for brain injury survivors and their loved ones are scarce in small towns, Jenna says, and as a member of the Advocacy and Awareness Ambassador Program, she aims to create awareness not only for her situation, but the brain injury community’s as a whole.

Regena Young, BSN, RSN

TENNESSEE

Regena J. Young is a registered nurse, a dedicated community advocate, and a TBI survivor.

As a survivor, Regena is dedicated to serving individuals and their family members affected by traumatic brain injury. She has served as the Outreach and Injury Prevention Coordinator for Erlanger Trauma Services in Chattanooga, Tenn., for the past 11 years, where she works closely with local organizations to promote awareness, education and resources for various injury prevention efforts.

Regena participates in local, state, and national committees including the Tennessee Injury Prevention Coalition, the Trauma Center Association of America’s Advocacy Committee, Southeast Regional Healthcare Coalition (Chairperson), and the Hamilton County Regional Healthcare Coalition.



THE NATIONAL BRAIN INJURY ACTION PLAN: BUILDING A COORDINATED FUTURE FOR BRAIN INJURY CARE AND RESEARCH



America needs a Brain Injury National Action Plan.

Brain injury is more common than most people think. In fact, at least one in four Americans have experienced a brain injury, yet we still don't have a national strategy to improve treatment, research, or support. The Brain Injury Association of America and our partners are calling for a Brain Injury National Action Plan: a new way of thinking to address the complex issues of brain injury, and to ensure that brain injury survivors and their families can recover and thrive.

What It Is

A first-of-its-kind federal initiative designed to make brain injury a national public health priority, the National Brain Injury Action Plan establishes a comprehensive framework to assess and strengthen how the United States prevents, identifies, treats, and supports people with brain injury.

What It Does

The plan establishes an Advisory Council charged with evaluating the state of federal brain injury programs and providing recommendations to advance care and research, as well as close service gaps.

The Advisory Council will:

- Assess prevalence and prevention opportunities
- Review classification systems
- Identify opportunities to improve data collection and sharing
- Evaluate medical coding practices
- Examine post-acute care and community reintegration strategies

Based on their findings, the Advisory Council will deliver an initial assessment to Congress outlining the state of brain injury in the United States, followed by annual reports offering recommendations to strengthen federal systems and ensure that every survivor can access consistent, high-quality care.

Upon receiving these reports, it will be up to Congress to enact legislation or appropriations aligned with the Council's recommendations, and for federal agencies to adopt policies that improve coordination, integration, and delivery of brain injury services nationwide.

Through cross-agency collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing evaluation, the plan creates a unified roadmap for progress – one that drives systemic change to empower survivors, support families, and strengthen our communities.



FOR TOO LONG, BRAIN INJURY HAS BEEN UNDERSTUDIED AND UNDERFUNDED, AND IT DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS VETERANS AND SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.”

MICHAEL S. JAFFEE, MD, FAAN, FANA CHAIR

GET ON BOARD, BUILDING SURVIVOR INVOLVEMENT IN MAINE AND BEYOND

By Carole Starr and Kelly Lang, Brain Injury Advisory Council Members



Last year, brain injury survivors in Maine had a unique opportunity to learn how to get more involved in the brain injury community. Our virtual program, Get on Board, was hosted by the Brain Injury Association of America-Maine Chapter and funded by the Grassroots Project.

As long-term brain injury survivors, speakers, authors, and advocates, we recognize the importance of survivor involvement in the brain injury community. Get on Board gives survivors a structured, supportive way to learn how to share their stories, contribute to their communities, and explore leadership roles.

We created Get on Board to fill a gap we saw in the survivor community. Survivors have powerful stories and a strong desire to contribute, but many aren't sure where to begin, often asking questions such as:

- How do I tell my story in a way that helps others?
- How can I turn what I've learned into something meaningful?
- Where can my voice make a difference?

Get on Board was designed to help survivors answer those questions and encourage involvement with practical training, support, and community.





A Statewide Response

Applications came in from 11 of Maine's 16 counties. The program's virtual format helped remove transportation, fatigue, and accessibility barriers, making it possible for survivors from all over the state to participate.

Three Modules Designed for Growth

The Maine Get on Board program included three structured learning modules. Each one addressed a different pathway for involvement. All attendees completed the first module, then chose additional ones based on their interests and energy level.

- **Module 1: Telling Your Story**
Sharing one's brain injury story can be powerful, but it also requires care and preparation. Participants learned to shape their stories in ways that were safe for them and helpful for their audience.
- **Module 2: Designing and Delivering Conference Workshops**
Designing a workshop can feel daunting. This module walked participants through choosing a topic, writing a workshop proposal, and pacing a presentation in a way that works well for both presenters and participants with brain injury.
- **Module 3: Serving on Boards and Committees**
Survivors bring essential lived expertise to organizations, yet board service can feel intimidating. This module focused on how boards function, what effective participation looks like, and how survivors can evaluate whether a board or committee is a good match.

The Importance of a Survivor-Led Program

As survivors, we understand firsthand the importance of honoring a measured pace that works for survivors. In each module, participants gradually practiced skills learned in a safe, welcoming environment. We shared our own journeys, modeled pacing, and encouraged attendees to get involved in ways that worked for their individual brain injuries.

Building Confidence and Community

Throughout the program, participants demonstrated growth—sometimes in big leaps, sometimes in small but meaningful steps. Some discovered leadership potential they had never named. Others found confidence in sharing their voice. The sense of community was valued by all—being surrounded by people who not only understood brain injury, but who also shared a desire to make a difference.

Leadership in Action

The Maine Get on Board participants didn't just learn new skills—they used them. Several joined us as co-presenters at the 2025 Maine Brain Injury Conference, where they shared their experience in the program and offered suggestions to other survivors who want to get involved. For some, it was their first time presenting publicly since their injuries.

We also presented a session about the Maine Get on Board program at the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA) State of the State Conference, held in Maine in October 2025. Sharing the program at a national gathering of state brain injury leaders demonstrated its potential to strengthen the survivor voice at both the state and national levels.

Get on Board participants are now exploring opportunities to join advisory groups, participate in advocacy efforts, and use their stories to help others. Their involvement strengthens Maine's brain injury community.

Looking Ahead

The success of the Maine program is one step in our broader goal to support survivor involvement nationwide. With continued Grassroots funding, the Brain Injury Association of America-Tennessee Chapter will host a Get on Board program this year. For more information about the Tennessee program, contact Stacy Mulder at smulder@biausa.org.

For survivors who want to contribute, Get on Board provides the tools, mentorship, and community to turn lived experience into meaningful action.

LEAVE A LASTING LEGACY

A bequest is a gift from your estate – a transfer of cash, securities, or other property made through your estate plans. You can make a bequest to the Brain Injury Association of America by including language in your will or living trust to leave a portion of your estate to the Association or by designating BIAA as a beneficiary of your retirement account or life insurance policy.

Remembering the Brain Injury Association of America with a bequest from your estate will help sustain and strengthen the Association in years to come. Some of the advantages of creating a bequest include:

- Retaining control and use of your assets during your lifetime
- The ability to modify your bequest if your circumstances change
- Tax exemptions as gifts to BIAA from your estate are exempt from federal estate taxes

Let Us Thank You: Futures Fund Legacy Society

If you have included the Brain Injury Association of America in your estate plans, please let us know. We would like to thank you for your generosity, make sure the purpose of your gift is understood by the Association, and recognize you as a member of the Futures Fund Legacy Society.

Futures Fund Spotlight: Dr. Robert Sbordone

The world of brain injury lost an authority and leader in research and education when Dr. Robert Sbordone passed away in 2015. Dr. Sbordone continues to help others through his generous bequest to the Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA).

The bequest provides an unprecedented opportunity for BIAA to invest in strategic revenue growth and long-term stability. In honor of Dr. Sbordone's generosity, BIAA created the Robert Sbordone Memorial Lecture series on mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) and concussion. These online lectures are led by licensed social workers, medical doctors, and other professionals in the field of brain injury.



Learn more by contacting the development department at development@biausa.org or 703-761-0750 ext. 645 or visiting biausa.org/futuresfund.

A COMMUTER'S BRAIN INJURY JOURNEY

It was an ordinary December morning for Kelly Hartnett. She was commuting to her office in midtown Manhattan, lugging her laptop and a bag of Santa hats for the office Christmas party.

As she approached her stop on the subway, she felt what she describes as an excruciating pain in her head. It was enough that she cried out in pain, prompting her fellow commuters to ask if she was alright. A good Samaritan took her hand and led her off the train. "I still didn't grasp how serious the situation was," she recalled. Kelly was disoriented and confused, and had trouble speaking. The woman who guided her off the train sat with her and waited until an EMT arrived and took her to the nearby Mt. Sinai West Neurological Hospital, where she was diagnosed with a hemorrhaged arteriovenous malformation (AVM) and underwent a seven-hour brain surgery.

During her recovery, Kelly kept her mind sharp by mentally writing her brain injury story, making sure to capture the details while they were still fresh. "I've always thought of myself as clever and funny, using humor as a coping mechanism. I even started coming up with brain injury catchphrases that I imagined printing on T-shirt," she said.

When she Googled some of her ideas, she discovered that many of them were already being produced – by the Brain Injury Association of America. It prompted her to take a closer look at the organization.

"As I researched the BIAA, I discovered that the organization also serves as an advocate for brain injury survivors, fighting for their rights and working

to ensure they receive the health benefits they deserve, as much as any other recognized group with disabilities," she said. "The BIAA truly understood the invisible injuries and scars left by brain surgery. Their support acknowledged not only the physical recovery but also the emotional and cognitive challenges that are often less visible to others. Reading other people's personal stories similar to mine helped me realize I was not alone in my struggle. Knowing that others faced similar challenges and experiences provided comfort and reassurance during my recovery."

She also learned that March is Brain Injury Awareness Month, and challenged herself to hold a fundraiser. She created a fundraising page and shared her story on Facebook – an approach she said made her story more impactful and helped readers connect with what she was going through. "As a result, many felt inspired to support BIAA," she said. She also set up a separate fundraiser at her job, which offers a company match, when she was able to return to work.

Prior to her injury, Kelly volunteered on a regular basis, which gave her a sense of appreciation and gratitude. "Fundraising for BIAA gave me back that sense of purpose and allowed me to do something the 'old me' would have done, while also helping others," she shared. "I truly believe that fundraising played a significant role in my healing journey."



**STARTING YOUR OWN BRAIN INJURY AWARENESS MONTH
FUNDRAISER IS EASY! TO GET STARTED, SCAN THE QR CODE OR VISIT:
GIVE.BIAUSA.ORG/CAMPAIGN/BRAIN-INJURY-AWARENESS-MONTH/C752403**





2025 LUMINARY OF THE YEAR

By Lauren Moore, Marketing and Communications Manager, Brain Injury Association of America

The Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA) introduced our Luminary of the Year campaign in 2024, with the goal of shining a light on those who have made a significant impact on the brain injury community. In 2025, in addition to our national event held in Washington, D.C., the BIAA-Texas Chapter held its own Luminary of the Year event, celebrating leadership, innovation, and impact on the Texas brain injury community.





Washington, D.C.

On November 14, 2025, more than 200 members of the brain injury community attended BIAA's Luminary of the Year event, coming together to honor Dr. Mark Ashley, Founder and Executive Chairman of the Board of Centre for Neuro Skills and the 2025 Luminary of the Year honoree.

The event, held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., raised more than \$650,000 to benefit BIAA's programs, research initiatives, and advocacy efforts. It was also an opportunity for the community to celebrate Dr. Ashley, whose decades of clinical work, research, and advocacy for the brain injury community have had an impact on millions of families across the country.

"When he first came to this field, there were people trying to make things better for patients with brain injuries, but there was no path. There was no way. That way had to be built, it had to be constructed," said Dr. Matt Ashley, Chief Medical Officer at Centre for Neuro Skills "Finding a way is just part of the DNA of Centre for Neuro Skills, and of Mark."

Peter Thomas, disability rights attorney and managing partner at Powers Pyles Sutter and Verville PC, commented that Dr. Ashley put transitional and residential programs for people with disabilities on the map. "The fact that there are residential and transitional brain injury treatment programs that are routinely

recognized today as necessary – medically necessary and critically important care for people with brain injuries – is a lasting legacy of Mark," Thomas said.

"Mark Ashley has made a permanent, positive impact on millions of people with brain injury and their families through his research, his clinical work, and his advocacy," noted Susan Connors, former President and CEO of the Brain Injury Association of America, calling his vision "extraordinary."

In reflecting on his legacy, Dr. Ashley acknowledged the collective efforts of the brain injury community, who "worked in such earnest" toward the goal of bettering life for people with brain injuries. "I was just a part of that," he said.

The event also celebrated Fundraising Champions Maxey Scherr, BIAA's Legal Fundraising Champion, and Danielle Brazant, the Community Impact Fundraising Champion.

In addition to celebrating the achievements of Dr. Ashley and the efforts of our Fundraising Champions, the event included a cocktail reception, dinner, auction, and Fund the Mission Moment. BIAA would also like to acknowledge Cohen Veterans Bioscience for their donation match of \$100,000, as well as Traumatic Brain Injury Litigation Group's \$50,000 gift in the room.

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Texas

About 200 members of the brain injury community came together on October 10, 2025, at the Crystal Ballroom at The Rice in Houston to celebrate Dr. Cindy Ivanhoe, Director of the Spasticity and Associated Syndromes of Movement Program at TIRR Memorial Hermann and BIAA-Texas' inaugural Luminary of the Year honoree. The Texas Chapter's Luminary of the Year Gala, a celebration of leadership, innovation, and impact in the field of brain injury, raised more than \$150,000 for brain injury programs and advocacy efforts in Texas.

"I was hooked on how fascinating brain injury is, how each individual has a whole different set of circumstances, how a lot of different people didn't see what I could see in those patients," Dr. Ivanhoe said of her decision to become a brain injury physician. "I didn't go after this to be a huge name. I like to try and just be content if I made an impact on someone's life."

In a tribute video, brain injury professionals spoke to the influence and impact that Dr. Ivanhoe has had on the field, citing her kindness and compassion, as well as her dedication to patient advocacy.

"Dr. Ivanhoe's interactions with her patients are something to be seen," said Dr. Ana Durand-Sanchez of Moody Neurorehabilitation Institute. "She's extremely caring, she really establishes a bond with them, she makes sure that they feel well heard, well cared for, and that families are also a part of that mixture, which is really important in brain injury medicine."

Dr. Flora Hammond of Indiana University Health credited Dr. Ivanhoe with inspiring young physical medicine and rehabilitation physicians to pursue a career in brain injury medicine, saying they "come into the field of PM&R ready to change the world, inspired by Cindy."

Sherry Monroe, the mother of one of Dr. Ivanhoe's patients – Garrett, who sustained an anoxic brain injury six years ago after being pinned under a car and going into cardiac arrest – spoke to Dr. Ivanhoe's compassionate, dedicated care, as well as the need to support organizations like the Brain Injury Association of America.

"There's so much research being done, but there's so much more that needs to be done. There's so many things that can be helpful to a person recovering from brain injury, and organizations like this are vital," Monroe said.

The event also celebrated Fundraising Champions Nadine Eidman, whose husband, John Eidman, is one of Dr. Ivanhoe's patients; Allison Sanborn; Mark Steinhubl; and Lindsay McGregor

In addition to celebrating the achievements of Dr. Ivanhoe and the efforts of our Fundraising Champions, the event included a cocktail reception, dinner, auction, and Fund the Mission Moment.

“

THERE'S SO MUCH RESEARCH BEING DONE, BUT THERE'S SO MUCH MORE THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE. THERE'S SO MANY THINGS THAT CAN BE HELPFUL TO A PERSON RECOVERING FROM BRAIN INJURY, AND ORGANIZATIONS LIKE THIS ARE VITAL.

SHERRY MONROE

Mother of Garrett one of Dr. Ivanhoe's patients

STATE AFFILIATE NEWS

Indiana

The Brain Injury Association of Indiana (BIA-I) has been very busy as we entered the fall and winter seasons!

We kicked off the fall by hosting a half-day educational and interactive seminar for individuals impacted by brain injury. Our focus was “Living Well with Brain Injury in Indiana.” The day began with an adaptive Zumba session that got everyone energized. Our amazing presenters shared information on exercise, nutrition, and social communication after brain injury. Each session included interactive activities, allowing participants to engage and learn together.

A highlight of the seminar was hearing from two individuals living with brain injury who shared their personal journeys. Their stories left us with so much to reflect on and reminded us of the strength, resilience, and perseverance within our community.

BIA-I also hosted our most anticipated event of the year, the 4th Annual BIA-I Wiffleball Tournament, on October 25. This year’s tournament featured a full day of action-packed games, individual and team costume contests, local vendors, creative crafts, and a silent auction. Individuals and teams traveled from across



the state to compete in the spirit of community and recovery. We were thrilled to welcome more individuals living with brain injury than ever before, making this year’s event especially meaningful.

We are busy planning the first event in our 2026 Stride with a Specialist series. This series features a brain injury specialist sharing a brief talk on living well with brain injury, followed by a leisurely walk or roll around an indoor track. Participants will have the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals and build meaningful relationships within the community while engaging in light exercise. The first Stride with a Specialist event will take place on Saturday, February 28, leading us right into a busy March—Brain Injury Awareness Month.

Louisiana

The Brain Injury Association of Louisiana (BIA-LA) continues to expand outreach and strengthen support networks through active participation in community events across the state. Recently, BIA-LA engaged in the Louisiana Department of Health, Office of Aging and Adult Services regional resource fairs, providing valuable

opportunities to connect with case managers, support coordinators, and direct care professionals who serve individuals with brain injuries.

Our network of BIA-LA State Ambassadors played an important role by representing the organization at several of these fairs. Their involvement not only helped share critical resources with local communities but also allowed BIA-LA to broaden its presence at statewide events.

In addition to outreach, BIA-LA remains committed to fostering community reintegration and social connection. Thanks to a Quality of Life grant from the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, we recently hosted two highly attended community reintegration events: a bowling outing and a painting session. Both gatherings offered individuals with brain injuries and their caregivers meaningful opportunities to build friendships, strengthen support networks, and enjoy time together in an inclusive environment.

Through these ongoing efforts, BIA-LA continues to promote connection, engagement, and improved quality of life for the brain injury community across Louisiana.



Maine

The Brain Injury Association of America-Maine Chapter (BIAA-ME) published the 10th edition of its Maine Brain Injury and Stroke Resource Directory in early 2026. The directory is available in both print and digital formats and is distributed across Maine at no cost to recipients.

During Brain Injury Awareness Month, BIAA-ME will hold the 2026 BIAA-ME Brain Injury Resource Fair in Augusta on Thursday, March 19. The fair is designed to bring the Maine brain injury community together to explore a wide variety of resources, services, and supports.

Under Maine's current Administration for Community Living grant, BIAA-ME continues to collaborate with Maine's Office of Aging & Disability Services to work with three pilot sites to increase brain injury screening and resource facilitation within agencies providing mental health and substance use disorder services throughout Maine.



Missouri

The Brain Injury Association of Missouri (BIA-MO) extended the traditional Giving Tuesday into "Brain Injury Giving Tuesdays." Survivors, families, impacts, and opportunities were highlighted each Tuesday in December 2025. Brain injury does not go away, so helping others should last for more than one day.

BIA-MO Concussions: Facts, Fallacies, and New Frontiers Seminars were held in January and February 2026. Locations included Columbia, Kansas City, and St. Louis, along with an online seminar. This training for youth sports and school personnel helps reduce the risks of concussions, improves concussion management, and supports students in return to learn.

BIA-MO Survivor and Family Seminars will be held in March and April 2026. Seminars will be in Kansas City, Springfield, and St. Louis. Each seminar will include the same sessions, with information focusing on understanding and living with brain injury.

Bowling for Brain Injury will return in June 2026. Teams are encouraged to participate in person in Kansas City, Springfield, and St. Louis. This event raises awareness and provides support for survivors of brain injury. Bowlers will enjoy a day of fun as they reach their team goal of \$500 or more. "Spare the Alley, Join the Rally" is available for participating in fundraising without bowling.



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Nebraska

On December 3 the Brain Injury Association of Nebraska (BIA-NE) was honored to partner with the Nebraska Medical Orchestra and Choir (NMOC) at their Eighth Annual Winter Concert. The evening beautifully blended music, community, and holiday cheer with a shared commitment to supporting Nebraskans living with brain injury.

As the featured community organization, BIA-NE welcomed guests to a pre-concert reception showcasing *A Peace of My Mind* — the powerful storytelling gallery by artist John Noltner that elevates the voices and lived experiences of individuals affected by brain injury. Seeing attendees pause, listen, and engage with these portraits reminded us why visibility and understanding matter so deeply, especially when so many injuries remain unseen.

The concert itself closed with a joyful holiday sing-along, echoing the spirit of connection we all felt throughout the night. We are grateful to NMOC, their musicians, and everyone who joined us. Because of gatherings like this, hope is visible for Nebraska's brain injury community.



New Hampshire

The Brain Injury Association of New Hampshire (BIA-NH) and the Department of Education have developed a concussion and traumatic brain injury Return to Learn policy and plan for the school districts in the State of New Hampshire. According to Revised Statute Section 200:63 the plan includes a recommendation on school-based concussion and brain injury in-service training. BIA-NH began working with Integration Sciences to build a return-to-learn program named The Center for Supporting New Hampshire Schools and Managing Return to Learn After Concussion. This concussion pilot project covers 13 different schools in the state of New Hampshire. Throughout the spring and summer of 2025, Integration Sciences developed a five-module online asynchronous Return to Learn course designed to support a student returning to school after a concussion. This online course was launched in the New Hampshire schools in the fall of 2025 and includes a Return to Learn Toolkit for each school district. The toolkit incorporates proper staff training, policies/procedures, community of practice, and tracking of students. At the end of the program, Integration Sciences will provide a summary report to the governor's office which is providing the funding for the initiative.

New York

On November 13, the Brain Injury Association of New York State (BIA-NYS) hosted its annual Journey of Hope Gala, an unforgettable evening celebrating the strength, resilience, and achievements of New York's brain injury community. As one of the association's signature events, the gala combines elegance with purpose, raising essential funds to support the vital programs and services that empower New Yorkers living with brain injuries and their families.

Set against the backdrop of the Manhattan Penthouse, the gala brought together attendees for a night of inspiration, connection, and recognition. Executive Director Eileen Reardon served as emcee, with support from the Honorary Committee Chair Wendell Miller, guiding the celebration and energy of the night.

The remarkable honorees for the evening included:

- **Paragon Management SNF** – Corporate Citizen Award
- **F. Allan Curran** – Philanthropy Award
- **Andrea Kim** – Barry Dain Champion of Hope Award
- **Paws of War** – Hero of Hope Award

Every award and speech highlighted the strength of the brain injury community and the many individuals and organizations working each day to support survivors and their families. The evening offered a vivid reminder of the resilience, compassion, and determination that shaped this statewide network of people committed to one another.

It was a night of elegance, celebration, and gratitude, a true testament to the power of community and the difference we can make together.



North Carolina

For adults living with brain injury in North Carolina, finding community and support can be a challenge. That's where Camp Thrive Together, hosted by the Brain Injury Association of North Carolina (BIA-NC), comes in. This annual weekend retreat offers a safe and welcoming space for participants to connect with peers who truly understand their experiences.

Campers enjoy a rich mix of recreational and therapeutic activities designed to engage, inspire, and uplift. From arts and crafts, to horseback riding, kayaking, fishing, campfires, and lively social events, every moment encourages creativity, connection, and joy. But Camp Thrive Together is about more than just fun, it's about fostering peer support, reducing isolation, and creating lasting friendships.

BIA-NC works to make the camp accessible, subsidizing much of the cost so that adults from across the state can benefit from this transformative experience. For participants, the weekend offers not only new skills and memorable experiences, but also a renewed sense of confidence, belonging, and community.

Camp Thrive Together is a shining example of how thoughtful programming can empower adults living with brain injury to reconnect with themselves, each other, and the possibilities that lie ahead.

Pennsylvania

The Brain Injury Association of Pennsylvania (BIA-PA) is pleased to announce a pilot program beginning in January 2026 in collaboration with Penn Foundation at St. Luke's, a substance use disorder (SUD) treatment program located in Sellersville, Pennsylvania. This project is a component of the Pennsylvania Department of Health's Brain Injury and Opioids initiative. The pilot will focus on identifying individuals with brain injury, implementing screening and symptom identification processes, and integrating brain injury-informed approaches into treatment planning. Individualized interventions will then be designed and implemented for those identified, enabling them to benefit from treatment that may not otherwise be effective and ultimately improving outcomes. Our team will be embedded within the SUD program, working side by side with staff to implement the model. The overarching goal of the pilot is to inform and support systems-level change.

Our first in-person ReDiscover U Community Classes initiative, made possible through contract with the Pennsylvania Department of Health, launched with four community drum circle sessions across Pennsylvania, and the series was a fantastic success! Held at rehabilitation sites statewide, each session invited participants into a supportive, welcoming space to experience the grounding, energizing, and healing



qualities of group drumming. Guided by skilled facilitators, the circles promoted stress reduction, social connection, and accessible creative expression for individuals of all abilities.

This strong start really shows how meaningful it is to bring community-based experiences directly to survivors. We're excited to keep that momentum going with our next statewide series, a guided canvas painting class designed to spark creativity, build confidence, and create connection through art.

South Carolina

The Brain Injury Association of South Carolina (BIA-SC) is thrilled to share some truly inspiring news that's been a long time in the making! We have been awarded a generous three-year grant from South Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)! This FY26 Cross Sector Impact grant, kicking off with \$15,000 in Year 1, will empower us to launch a transformative creative writing project designed by and for brain injury survivors.

Imagine a space where stories of resilience, healing, and rediscovery come alive on the page, facilitated by a fellow survivor, Cinelle Burns, who truly understands the journey. That's the heart of this program: a supportive workshop series that harnesses the power of writing to foster connection, spark joy, and celebrate the unique voices within our community. The grant covers the full three-year run, ensuring sustained impact and opportunities for growth.



Tennessee

The Brain Injury Association of America - Tennessee Chapter (BIAA-TN) is excited to announce the launch of its statewide Community Council, bringing together corporate partners, survivors, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and advocates to strengthen support for the brain injury community across Tennessee. The council is organized into four working groups—Advocacy, Provider Education, Community Development, and Fundraising—each focused on building capacity, expanding resources, and elevating the needs and voices of Tennesseans living with brain injury.

Early interest and engagement have been strong. Council members are already participating in legislative outreach, identifying gaps in provider training, exploring opportunities for statewide resource development, and helping shape future awareness and outreach efforts. This collaborative model is designed to ensure that BIAA-TN's work reflects the diverse perspectives and priorities of individuals and professionals across the state.

There is still time to get involved. Whether you are a community partner, survivor, caregiver, or clinician, your experience and insight can help strengthen life after brain injury in Tennessee.

For more information or to join the BIAA-TN Community Council, contact Stacy Mulder, Executive Director, at smulder@biausa.org or **615-988-9638**.

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EVENTS AND WEBINARS

MARCH 9-11, 2026 | 3 P.M. ET

National Brain Injury Conference and Awareness Day

HILTON ARLINGTON NATIONAL LANDING, ARLINGTON, VA.

The Brain Injury Association of America's 2026 National Conference and Awareness Day will bring together the brain injury community to inspire action, drive advocacy, celebrate achievements, and strengthen our collective impact through dynamic sessions, networking, and opportunities to advocate on Capitol Hill. Whether you are a person living with a brain injury, a caregiver, or a healthcare provider, this conference will offer tools, resources, and networking opportunities for leaders (and emerging leaders) in the brain injury community to inspire action.

MARCH 24, 2026 | 1 P.M. ET

Projects to Create Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement for Adults with ABI

MELISSA CAPO, M.S., CCC-SLP

Projects can open doors to connection, purpose, and growth for adults living with acquired brain injury. This session will introduce the foundations of project-oriented intervention, share the theory and research behind it, and bring it to life through real examples of media projects co-designed with individuals facing communication, cognitive, self-regulation, and behavioral challenges. Participants will leave with fresh ideas for fostering meaningful engagement in treatment and everyday life.

MARCH 31, 2026 | 3 P.M. ET

Helping Kids Thrive at School after Brain Injury

BRENDA EAGAN-JOHNSON, ED.D., CBIST-AP

Returning to school after a brain injury is an important step in a child's recovery journey. This Carolyn Rocchio Caregivers webinar will help parents and other caregivers understand how brain injury can affect a child's learning, behavior, and social interactions at school. Participants will learn practical strategies to support their child's success in the classroom, foster communication with educators, and promote emotional well-being during the transition back to school. The session will also highlight available school supports and community resources that can help children thrive as they recover and learn.

APRIL 9, 2026 | 3 P.M. ET

Improving Outcomes: Diagnosis and Management of Partner-Inflicted Brain Injury

RACHEL RAMIREZ, MA, MSW, LISW-S, RA

Brain injuries are currently under-identified, under-diagnosed and under-treated among survivors of domestic violence. This webinar, brought to you in partnership with the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, provides healthcare professionals with key information on diagnosis and management of partner-inflicted brain injury, including application of a trauma-informed and survivor-centered approaches to care. The session will also cover the unique health concerns among survivors, as well as available clinical tools to help with diagnosis and management of partner-inflicted brain injury.

APRIL 15, 22, & 29, 2026 | 11 A.M. TO 4:30 P.M. ET

CBIS Virtual Prep Course

Interested in earning your Certified Brain Injury Specialist certification? Sign up for our CBIS Certification Prep Bundle! This exclusive all-in-one package includes access to live virtual trainings led by Certified Brain Injury Specialist Trainers; the CBIS application fee; a hardcover copy of the new The Essential Brain Injury Guide 6.0 and study companion workbook; and a one-year subscription to the Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation. This program is ideal for professionals working in acute care, post-acute rehab, behavioral health, social work, vocational rehab, or education.

APRIL 23, 2026 | 12 P.M. ET

What Survivors of Domestic Violence Need to Know About Brain Injury

RACHEL RAMIREZ, MA, MSW, LISW-S, RA

Domestic violence can cause more than visible injuries; it can also lead to brain injuries that affect memory, thinking, mood, and daily life. Symptoms such as headaches, confusion, irritability, or trouble concentrating may be related to past harm. This webinar, brought to you in partnership with the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, offers clear, compassionate information to help you understand possible signs of brain injury, how these injuries may affect day-to-day activities, and learn practical strategies for support and healing. The session is designed to be empowering, respectful, and trauma-informed. No medical background is needed.

MAY 7, 2026 | 3 P.M. ET

Concussion Rehabilitation: Autonomic Nervous System Dysfunction Assessment and Treatment

CHRISTINE WILLIAMS, PT, DPT

This webinar will cover autonomic nervous system dysfunction/dysautonomia in concussion. This includes assessment considerations for the rehabilitation professional. The presentation will also include the benefit of incorporating treatment for this condition into concussion rehabilitation to improve outcomes and indications for referring to a specialist.

MAY 20, 2026 | 3 P.M. ET

"Just One:" Building Cognitive and Emotional Bandwidth after Brain Injury

AUDRA YETTER, M.S., CCC-SLP, BC-ANCDS, ADHD-CCSP

This session will explore how cognitive overload and emotional fatigue can limit effective communication, follow-through, and self-regulation after brain injury — both for survivors and for care partners. Drawing from principles of executive function, cognitive rehabilitation, and behavioral science, we'll explore the "Just One" method as a micro-strategy for initiating action, managing overwhelm, and supporting adaptive change.



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AD INDEX

Advertiser	Page
Centre for Neuro Skills.....	18
Collage Rehabilitation Partners.....	21
NBIC	23

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For more information on how to become part of the Brain Injury Association of America Corporate Partners Program, please visit biausa.org/corporate or contact Peter Knockstead at (703) 761-0750, ext. 640, or email pknockstead@biausa.org.

