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Governor's Committee on Employment
of People with Disabilities



ABILITIES

Promoting the employment of Vermont citizens of all abilities

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Dear Friends ~ Understanding Brain Injury



Fred Jones,
GCEPD Chair

On behalf of the Governor's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities, I would like to welcome you to the latest issue of "Abilities".

We are pleased to share with you the employment success story of GCEPD member Jim Vhynak for over 20 years while accommodating the lasting effects of a brain injury. It is our hope that his story and the accompanying article will enhance your understanding of brain injuries, how they manifest themselves, and how they can be accommodated in employment.

Thanks for reading on - and please feel free to share!

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Best regards,

Fred Jones, Chair

Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

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Congratulations to our winner!

Jim Vynhak's Story - from brain injury survivor to brain soother - *Story Synopsis*



Jim Vynhak

Twenty years ago Jim Vynhak was almost 30, living in Maine, newly married, and in graduate school pursuing studies in statistics. At that time he would never have anticipated that today he would be a successful entrepreneur making ukuleles!

A dramatic turning point came one week after his wedding, when a car accident (he was rear ended by a truck going 40 mph) left him with a moderate brain injury. The next five years were a frustrating period as he attempted to find the medical and professional support he needed to recover from his injury.

[click here to read more](#)

"Brain Injury-related Resources- *Story Synopsis*

If you or someone you know is seeking information, support and resources about brain injuries, here are three good places to begin:

1. Contact the [Brain Injury Association of America](#) to find the BIAA chapter nearest to you, or for direct support if your state does not have a chapter. We invite you to click below to read more and access links to some videotaped portions of this presentation.
2. To find the office in your state that provides funding for traumatic brain injuries - usually through a Medicaid waiver program - contact the [National Association of State Head Injury Administrators](#).
3. To get free legal help and advice, contact the [National Disability Rights Network](#), a source of "Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Disabilities".

[click here to read more](#)

The CART Scholarship Fund for brain injury survivors - *Story Synopsis*

In our last issue of ***Abilities*** we told you about our panel presentation featuring four individuals who shared their stories of receiving accommodations in the workplace. One of these individuals was Steve Cothalis, a respiratory therapist at Copley Health Systems. Steve, like Jim in our feature story, is a brain injury survivor.

In 2002, after suffering a severe brain injury due to a fall while hiking, Steve hiked the Long Trail to raise money to create a scholarship fund for *Vermonters* with a traumatic brain injury. He called this fund the "Cothalis Activity Recreation Therapy" fund, or CART fund for short. In recognition of this accomplishment, Steve was given the "Survivor of the Year" award by the Brain Injury Association.

The CART fund offers scholarships of up to \$500. Steve - an avid hiker - learned first hand that after suffering a brain injury, individuals often lose their recreational identities. Therefore, CART-awarded funds are to be used for ***recreational activities*** that will help a brain injury survivor further their recovery progress. Past recipients, for example, have used the funds for recreational therapy with horses and for kayak racing.

For more information on how to apply for the CART fund, please [click here](#).

[click here to read more](#)

Test your Knowledge

How much do you know about hiring a person with a disability? We invite you to take our [interactive test!](#)

MORE ON Jim Vyhnak's Story

Twenty years ago Jim Vyhnak was almost 30, living in Maine, newly married, and in graduate school pursuing studies in statistics. At that time he would never have anticipated that today he would be a successful entrepreneur making ukuleles!



A dramatic turning point came one week after his wedding, when a car accident (he was rear ended by a truck going 40 mph) left him with a moderate brain injury. The next five years were a frustrating period as he attempted to find the medical and professional support he needed to recover from his injury.

At that time there was a limited understanding of brain injury and little medical appreciation of how to diagnose and treat a moderate brain injury like Jim's. Most of the medical professionals - and many of his friends - thought of his injury as a mild brain injury, like a concussion, which he should recover from within a few weeks. His reality, however, was much different.

These are just some of the symptoms Jim had to learn to manage:

- blurred vision
- jittery eyes that darted back and forth
- a loss of peripheral vision
- a loss of the sense of smell
- poor balance
- stuttering and slurred speech
- poor memory and difficulty in processing data
- headaches
- numbness down his arms and legs
- loss of heat and cold sensitivity in his arms.

His brain processed things differently - very literally. He initially couldn't remember to wash daily. He knew he had a major medical problem and kept probing for answers. To his frustration the messages he got back from medical professionals and insurance companies were along the lines of these:

- Support groups will only teach you how to be brain injured or a loser
- Tough it out and shut up
- You're just lazy or depressed
- Your only problem is that you don't have a job

Finally, five years later Jim heard about a chapter of the Brain Injury Association in Rhode Island which sent him a lot of information on brain injury. He realized to his frustration that most of the suffering he had experienced since his accident had been unnecessary. Then he went to the Maine Medical Center which had begun to have great success in working with individuals with misdiagnosed brain injuries. They had some tests which confirmed his traumatic brain injury; they began treating his symptoms and helping him learn how to manage them.

With the significant support and treatment he was finally receiving, Jim was ready to return to school and the work world. By this time he and his wife

had relocated to Vermont. Jim went back to graduate school at The University of Vermont for his MS in Statistics. He then went to work at UVM's College of Medicine as a number cruncher. While he was successful at the job, he also was realizing that the stress of the job and a long commute was taking a toll on him physically and a career redirection was in order.

At this point Jim went to work with a counselor at Vermont's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, where he got the support he needed to launch the Brain Injury Gazette, a newsletter designed to provide crucial information and resources to brain injury survivors. He also belonged to some support groups that were beginning to discuss how to start a brain injury association in Vermont. Over time, people saw how well he was doing with the newsletter and asked him to be the new Executive Director of the Brain Injury Association of Vermont.

Jim embraced this new role - creating the organization, obtaining funding, setting up support groups, working with medical professionals, speaking to groups around the state, etc. However, as the organization grew, so too did its complexity, and Jim began to realize that the job wasn't working well for his body. He was grappling with fatigue, dizziness, bouts of poor vision, and stress symptoms. While he felt he was working in the right area for him, he knew he was no longer in the right role.

Then serendipity stepped in. Resuming his work with Voc Rehab, Jim devoted himself to re-launching his Brain Injury Gazette but this time doing it on a for profit basis. Unfortunately, the financial melt down of the recent "great recession" resulted in the loss of advertisers and the ultimate demise of the newsletter. Jim then turned to his other grand idea - making ukuleles - a choice he seemed to be led to.

On a Hawaiian vacation Jim and his wife had taken a stretch break from a long drive and just happened to pull over in front of a music store. They went inside, where the owner happened to show them a ukulele. They couldn't stop thinking about the ukulele, and the next day they returned to the store and purchased it. It should be noted that Jim had never successfully played any instrument.

The following Christmas Jim received a kit for assembling partially-made ukuleles. Applying the craft skills he learned during his youth from his father, a master carpenter, Jim put his unique touch and fine finishes on these ukuleles. Soon he was getting kudos and raves for his high quality work as well as purchase requests from both friends and professional musicians. The message was coming to him from all quarters that this was the work he should be doing.



Jim gave this idea serious thought. He already knew from research that ukulele sales were growing at a pace of 70 to 80% each year and that

manufacturers were having a hard time keeping up with the demand. He consulted with his counselor at Vocational Rehabilitation and professionals at the Micro Business Development Program. Soon he was on his way. He considered questions of quantity, quality, and niche and thought about the kind of ukuleles he wanted to make. Soon the Vermont Ukulele Company (www.vermontukulele.com) was born.

Now Jim produces fine, high end ukuleles from his home shop. He sources all of his wood from sustainable forests in Vermont. As his father did years ago, Jim goes directly to the wood mills himself and hand selects the right wood. He believes in supporting renewable and wise-use forestry practices.



Jim also uses hand tools to craft the ukuleles - much as they did 100 years ago - as he feels that high speed and high vibration tools can have a significant, negative effect on the tone and integrity of the wood. He feels good about what he is making, and proud to know that he is crafting a high quality ukulele that could be passed down for generations from parent to child. And using the skills he garnered while established the Brain Injury Association of Vermont, he is now able to profitably run his own business.

When asked why he thought there was such an upsurge in ukulele sales, Jim replied that he feels there is something about the high, happy tone that draws people, especially in times of great strife. Also they are easier to learn and play than a guitar and many other instruments.

And of particular note - ukuleles are great for brain injury survivors because learning and playing music is a great way to work parts of your brain that are otherwise hard to exercise.

So in 20 years Jim has moved full circle from being a misdiagnosed brain injury sufferer to a craftsman whose labors of love help promote brain health. He has found a professional, entrepreneurial niche that honors his interests and values. It is also a niche that seems helpful for managing his own health.

There are still a number of side effects of his injury that may never go away. He is hypersensitive to light and sounds, which can give him headaches and queasiness or cause him to fall and become disoriented. Sunglasses and earplugs can help but he still can't do certain things he loved such as go bowling, dancing, or to a movie. Rather, he has to go places where there aren't a lot of people or noise.

He says that good nutrition and exercise help. He avoids foods and beverages that cause inflammation in the brain such as artificial colors and sweeteners - especially Aspartame and yellow dye #5. He has learned how to

pace himself and manage his day to maximize his mental clarity. Cognitive therapy is helpful as well.

As Jim says, TBI is a lifelong thing that you have to learn to deal with - some symptoms improve over time, some worsen with aging. He has learned to avoid, adapt, or accommodate. Now, after twenty years of perseverance to find the right adaptation, Jim's life is now one of making beautiful music.

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MORE ON Brain Injury-related Resources

Founded in 1980, the ***Brain Injury Association of America*** (BIAA) is the leading national organization serving and representing individuals, families, and professionals who are touched by a life-altering, often devastating, traumatic brain injury (TBI). Together with its network of more than 40 chartered state affiliates, as well as hundreds of local chapters and support groups across the country, the BIAA provides information, education and support to assist the 5.3 million Americans currently living with traumatic brain injury and their families.

If you or someone you love has sustained a brain injury, please call the Brain Injury Association of America at 1-800-444-6443 for information.

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In 1990 NASHIA - the ***National Association of State Head injury Administrators*** - became the first and remains the only forum addressing State government's significant role in brain injury. NASHIA is the premier source of information and education for State Agency employees who are responsible for public brain injury policies, programs, and services. NASHIA is also the voice of State government in Federal TBI policy issues.

NASHIA reaches out to all State Agency employees who interact with individuals with brain injury and welcomes membership by advocates, professionals, and organizations with an interest in State and local policy and service delivery. For information, visit www.nashia.org.

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The National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) is the nonprofit membership organization for the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Systems and Client Assistance Programs (CAP) for individuals with disabilities. The NDRN serves a wide range of individuals with disabilities - including but not limited to those with cognitive, mental, sensory and physical disabilities - by guarding against abuse; advocating for basic rights; and ensuring accountability in health care, education, employment, housing, transportation, and within the juvenile and criminal justice systems. For information, visit www.napas.org.

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MORE ON the CART Scholarship Fund for brain injury survivors

CART Scholarship Fund

Applicants must be residents of Vermont. Applications will be accepted for review throughout the year and scholarships will be awarded bi annually. Awarded funds are to be used for recreational activities that will help a BI survivor further their recovery progress.

The maximum scholarship awarded is \$500 per Applicant. Please note that Brain Injury Support Group Leaders may apply for a scholarship to be used for Support Group activities. In this case the Support Group Leader will be responsible for appropriate use of the CART Scholarship.

Personal Statement

The Applicant must submit a brief typed statement (500 words) that provides information on his/her background and on what recreational activity they wish to participate in.

Letter of Recommendation

A note from the Applicant's therapist commenting on the possible benefits the Applicant receives from participating in his/her chosen recreational activity must be submitted with the application.

Doctor's Statement

Each Applicant must supply a doctor's statement certifying that the Applicant has sustained a brain injury and that the Applicant is fit to participate in their chosen activity.

Certification and Release

All applicants and where appropriate their parents or guardian must sign the application certifying that all information provided is true and complete to the best of their knowledge and ability. With their signature and submission of the application, applicants also grant the CART Scholarship Fund the right to use this information to promote and publicize the CART Scholarship. They also give the CART Scholarship Committee permission to contact them, their therapist(s) and/or doctor for additional information.

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Congratulations . . .

. . . to Fran Ramsey, Payroll, Benefits & Recruiting Administrator at Hampton Direct in Williston. Fran was the winner in our drawing for a Green Mountain Coffee Roasters gift basket, offered to visitors to our booth at last month's human resources conference at StoweFlake in Stowe, Vermont. Many thanks to Green Mountain Coffee Roasters for their kind donation.

Thanks for reading this issue of "Abilities". We welcome your comments, feedback, and suggestions for future issues. Copies of past issues may be found on our website - www.hireus.org, or in the [Constant Contact archives](#).

Melita DeBellis,

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