

Brain injury survivor supporting Headway

ACORKMAN who suffered a serious brain injury in a road accident on his way to work has spoken about his incredible recovery as part of an appeal to raise funds for a new state-of-the-art facility.

Stephen Forrest from Farranree was on his way to work three years ago when life took a dramatic turn.

"I was working as a production manager for Kinsale Bay Foods when the accident happened," he said.

"It was a Wednesday morning and I had just got off the train to walk to work in Little Island. It was the only week I had a 10am start as usually my working day began at 6am."

Stephen's life was turned upside down in a matter of seconds.

"I was rushed to hospital and placed in an induced coma. I went from being in the Intensive Care Unit to a stint in the neurology ward."

He recalled being in a state of disbelief after he woke up.

"I couldn't believe there had been so many articles about me. Reading them back was very surreal. It was hard to believe it was me they were writing about," said Stephen.

"The story got coverage on TV3." Life after the accident wasn't always easy for Stephen.

"I never realised how I was until the drive home from the hospital. I couldn't stop throwing up in the car. However, it was while out on a run that I realised I couldn't do the things I used to. I was told I would be very prone to seizures for a year after my accident.

"That became a huge worry. I was constantly frightened of what might happen. It was quite a scary time. All these emotions and thoughts hit me at once. My stamina was gone. That was when it hit me that this wasn't a cut on the knee."

However, Stephen stayed resilient and puts much of his strength down to past traumas.

"At the age of 15 I was stabbed in the neck," he said.

"It missed my main artery by a quarter of an inch. Then in 2015, I lost a childhood friend. It all comes down to resilience. Everyone has choices. I could have sat at home taking tablets and just existing but I knew I still had choices."

He said that strangers had difficulty believing he was so seriously injured in the incident.

"I have a scar on my forehead from the accident. To outsiders it looks like a tattoo or piece of dirt. Often someone will point out that I have dirt on my face. I'll have to explain that it's a scar from the accident but they're not always convinced."

"Strangers often think that I'm making it up. It's not something you expect to hear."

Stephen said the stigma around brain injury can be difficult to deal with.

“Brain injury is still a very taboo subject. I knew people were avoiding me on the street. Others would pretend not to see me and turn away.”



Stephen Forrest from Farranree was on his way to work three years ago when life took a dramatic turn. The former service user of Headway, an organisation supporting brain injury survivors, is urging the public to donate to the charity amid plans for a new brain injury facility in Carrigrohane.



Stephen Forrest: I couldn't believe there had been so many articles about me. Reading them back was very surreal. It was hard to believe it was me they were writing about.

Picture: Denis Minihane

"A lot of people were inclined to forget about me when they heard I had survived. That was hard as so few people knew the story afterwards. Don't get me wrong, it was great that I lived, but coping with the effects of a brain injury isn't easy."

"Even if I was offered all the money in the world I would still take the life I had before. People say things like 'you look great' but they don't realise the level of work it takes to get to that stage. I worked extremely hard to get to where I am today."

He described the impact of his brain injury: "I'll never be able to go back to my old job."

"My life is very different to the one

I had before. I rarely socialise.

"I don't go to matches like I used to. Having a brain injury has put life into context."

"While I loved the atmosphere of these places they now leave me with extreme fatigue. By the end of it, I'm physically and emotionally drained. It's the things that other people take for granted that you end up missing out on."

Headway played a significant part in helping Stephen rebuild his life.

"Before my accident, I didn't know what a brain injury was. It took me nine months to get into Headway. When I did the organisation helped me in so many ways," he said.

"They shone a light on so much of what I was going through. I was able to gain an understanding of why I acted in such a way in certain situations. Family and friends often got the brunt of my frustration."

"Little things like realising why the simplest things put me in bad form was really helpful. Headway challenged me but in healthy and positive ways. Being there on a regular basis really boosted my self-

esteem. You always remember the way people make you feel."

He believes that people are often uncomfortable with the subject of brain injury.

"Brain injury is still a very taboo subject. I knew people were avoiding me on the street. Others would pretend not to see me and turn away. People didn't know how to approach the situations. They didn't know the extent of my brain injury or if I was even capable of stringing sentences together. There's not a lot of awareness around brain injuries."

The 29-year-old is now studying Coaching Psychology in UCC.

"I'd really like to give back to Headway. Going forward I'd like to find a way of helping people with any capacity who might just be going through a difficult time."

The Farranree native highlighted his story as part of a campaign to raise much-needed funds for the new rehabilitation centre, set to be relocated at Carrigrohane Road.

At the end of 2018, Headway purchased the site for the centre. The front portion y comprises a single

storey office building, which Headway has rented in recent years. Their hope is to merge existing services in Ballincollig and Carrigrohane to deliver a rehabilitation centre for people living with a brain injury. A total of €500,000 will be required to facilitate the creation of a state-of-the-art, not-for-profit facility.

This will include landscaping, construction, renovations and furnishing of a location catering for hundreds of survivors and their families each year.

The organisation's hope is to engage locally while availing of opportunities to encourage local government, organisations, schools, and families to get involved to deliver vital services for brain injury survivors and their families. All funds raised will be ringfenced for the development of the centre which will provide support to individuals and families in crisis.

■ For more information on the initiative and how to donate visit <https://headway.ie/get-involved/support-our-campaigns/cork-capital/>