

# Making a Comeback

*by Jack Inns*

*Reprinted with permission from San Diego Log, Dec 31-Jan 14, 1999 issue*

Longtime San Diego yacht broker Bob Wilson--brutally beaten and left for dead with a crushed skull in a Louisiana apartment three years ago--is putting his life back together and is now selling his first boat since the attack.

On June 30, 1995, Wilson, now 54, was working in Jefferson Parish in Louisiana while processing Federal Emergency Management Agency claims for flood victims. The late-night attack, carried out with a claw-hammer left on scene, was discovered by the apartment's landlord on the morning of July 1.

A computer, printer and money and a truck were taken. No solid leads ever surfaced in the attack.

When Ellen first saw her husband in the intensive care unit of Ochsner Hospital, "His head had swollen to the size of a watermelon from being beaten with a hammer, so that he was unrecognizable."

Wilson's skull and face had multiple fractures, his left eye orbit was caved in, his lungs had collapsed, hand and fingers were broken, he was in a coma and not expected to live. The attack had produced injuries to every lobe of his brain.

But Wilson fought. In three days he came out of the coma, Ellen said. It was a month before he would be transferred to a rehabilitation hospital in upstate New York, and several months before he could recall the details of his attack and provide police artists with a description of a suspect.

But trauma to Wilson's left frontal lobe affected his expressive and receptive centers.

Functions many take for granted such as language; reading; writing; abstract reasoning; processing multiple thoughts simultaneously; and his ability to initiate, motivate, organize and execute, were lost or severely diminished.

Doctors painted a bleak neuropsychological future.

"They told me that what I saw after six months was what I'd get," Ellen said. "What they tell wives in situations like this is, 'You've lost the husband you used to know.'"

They also told Ellen that less than two percent of spouses stay with husbands after a serious brain injury.

Ellen stayed and Wilson progressed.

Speech therapy finally began coaxing out words: sometimes garbled and unintelligible, sometimes two or three word sentences.

Physical therapy worked on hands also badly broken in the assault.

Wilson's first milestone was to make a fist. A year later he could hold an object in his hands.

A follow-up neuropsychological report was issued. The report was devastating, Ellen said.

It stated Wilson's recovery was already 98% complete and they could expect little improvement in the future. As damning as the report was, the Wilsons decided to keep a positive attitude and focus only on reports that were positive.

"Most professionals in brain injury tend to write a script," she said. It usually reads, "This is what they can and can't do." The script can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

They ignored this particular script and his recovery continued.

After two years, Wilson learned to drive again. He finally regained the ability to make basic sentences and speak fairly well.

Ellen began to notice Wilson's humor returning. "I saw the essence of Bob returning," she said. "His humor, his main purpose in life was to make people laugh and it still is."

But the recovery has its ups and downs. Bob lost his driver's license he'd regained.

"But Bob is the most courageous, determined man I've ever met," Ellen said. He got his license back again.

And somewhere along the way his long-submerged independence resurfaces.

One day last summer Wilson announced to Ellen he'd like to fly to New York and get his truck--the truck he'd been using 42 months earlier when attacked--and drive it back to San Diego. Single handed.

Ellen encouraged him. "Everyone deserves the dignity of risk," she said.

Wearing a medallion that informs others he has suffered a brain injury, and a favorite baseball cap, Wilson headed for the airport.

He showed his medallion and airport personnel helped him make connections, Ellen said. One carrier summoned a bus to take him to another terminal. He was the only passenger on an 80-seat bus.

Wilson made it back to New York without a hitch. He picked up this truck and drove it home.

But back in San Diego, a question surfaced: What to do with a salvaged life?

As if on cue, a small powerboat--one he had sold a few times in the past--came Wilson's way. The boat needed refurbishing and Wilson took the task to hand.

"He's just getting to the point where he can plan projects, whether it's stripping, cleaning, sanding or varnishing," Ellen said. "Now he's starting to be able to plan, organize and carry through and follow through to completion."

The couple are not sure just where Wilson will find success. It may be brokering, it may be refurbishing boats, it may be something different.

Ellen states, "Each day never ceases to amaze me as I watch my husband coming back. Much more than anyone ever said he would or could."