

Proud to be Survivors!

About 70 survivors and their families attended the March meeting to hear six survivors tell their stories of recovery from a brain injury.

The presenters were **Vicki Binde, Ron Oliverio, Cathie Kurek, Jeff Pastore, Noel Montero and Steve Zandy**. Each panelist shared the story behind his or her brain injury, what their life was like before and after their injury, and how family members and friends responded.

All of the survivors had victories to share. Successes ranged from moving to the west coast to attend the Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) program at Mesa College, to living independently on their own, to having a job and starting their own businesses.

Noel Montero shared that living on her own for the first time since being disabled is what she is most proud of. Making the transition to being independent hasn't been easy, considering that six years ago most doctors said that even IF she managed to survive she wouldn't be able to live a quality life. The thing that helped her was to stop asking, "Why me?" Instead she asks, "What's next?" The daily process of searching for the answers to that question is what compels her to move forward in life now. Noel concluded, "I'm learning to accept the challenges I've been given."

Ron Oliverio expressed gratitude to his wife for all the support and help she gives him in facing the reality of his brain injury. A key to his recovery has been "looking for successes." Ron has adopted a model of discovery, "That has taught me to appreciate things more, accept that which is, whatever it is, and gain from it. Success is discovery."

Cathie Kurek proudly announced that after the meeting she would be moving into a studio apartment. This will be the first time in 23 years that she will be living alone. Cathie expressed gratitude for the Foundation and advised survivors to "be a support to each other."

Steve Zandy believes that his brain injury was the best thing that ever happened to him because it caused him to stop and reflect about his life. Before his accident, he felt lost, very insecure, and without direction. He thought he could find security and self-respect by drinking, but in 1986 his life was turned upside down. At age 16, he took his sister's car while drinking. He crashed into a tree. Steve was in a coma for 2-1/2 months. Now he attends the ABI program and feels he has a sense of direction and self-respect. "When you have self-respect, the world is yours. That is the best feeling. I'm creating a new life for myself," concluded Steve.

Vicki Binde shared, "I've learned a lot of things to make my life easier." She uses such strategies as a date-book and post-it notes. She advised survivors, "You have your own life. You know what's going on for you and what you need. I can't tell you"

Jeff Pastore sees his brain injury as a gift. "I feel closer to life than I've ever felt before." Jeff said, "I appreciate the little things in life, maybe more so than the average person will ever get to experience because of the things I've been through." The brain injury community here has become like a family to him

Each survivor had a courageous story of recovery to share. It was not only informative to hear, but an inspiration to other brain injury survivors and their families. Everyone joined in celebrating the victories of the survivors and shared in their hopes for the future.