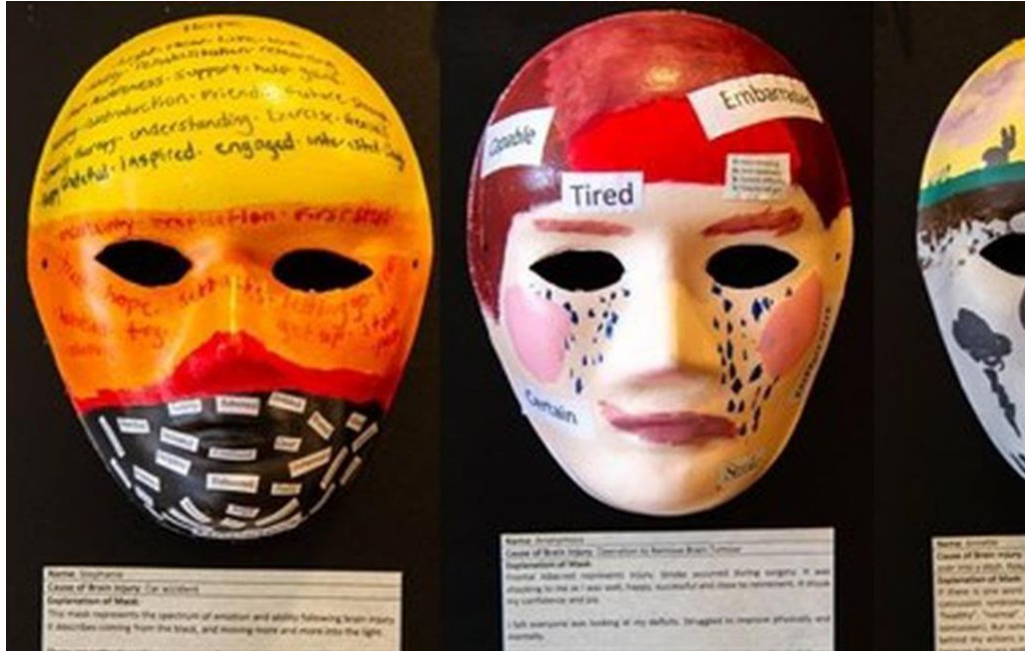


'I am not depressed. I am just like a fairy with wet wings.'



She was just bending down, trying to adjust a backrest in a minivan.

But the lever she grabbed also controlled the mechanism that automatically folded the van's seats into the floor to make storage space.

They hit Denise Theroux in the head, and her life was never the same.

The Kitchener woman lost the small business she owned. She was no longer able to drive. She even lost her ability to participate in daily life.

She gets terrible headaches and nausea.

Sometimes she becomes so sensitive to light that she has to wear sunglasses in a darkened room. "I couldn't tolerate the light of the lamp," she said.

Theroux and several dozen other local survivors of brain injury have told their stories through masks they have painted and decorated.

It's an emotional exhibit that vividly shows how it feels to manage the fatigue, dizziness, mood changes and frustration that are common with acquired brain injuries caused by events such as car accidents, falls and sports injuries.

These are on display until Sunday in the cafeteria at Grand River Hospital. From there, they will be shown at Guelph General Hospital June 12 to 24, and at Monigram Coffee Roasters in Cambridge, June 21 to 30.

The project is called Unmasking Brain Injury and is part of a province-wide initiative.

It provides these survivors with "a powerful way to tell their stories, making the invisible visible," said Lynda Abshoff, executive director of the Ontario Brain Injury Association Waterloo-Wellington.

Theroux has suffered for two years.

Right after she got hurt in 2016, she told her family she was fine. But she wasn't.

That same day, she went to the store for hotdog buns and came back with a cup of coffee and no buns.

She tried to play cards with her grandson and the cards "were looking funny — I couldn't figure out the numbers."

"I was getting really dizzy."

Then she got a fever. She thought she had caught a bad flu and assumed it would pass.

It wasn't until two weeks later, when she was out walking her dog and she was unsteady on her feet, that a neighbour who happens to be a physician realized she needed treatment for a head injury.

"Have you hit your head?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied. "How did you know?"

He insisted that she go to the hospital.

She often wonders what would have happened if her injury had just gone undiagnosed.

"There's so many people that don't have access (to medical experts,)" she said.

"How many 'bag ladies' out there have a brain injury?"

Recovery has been a winding, uncertain road for Theroux as well as for many others in her situation.

She has tried different therapies, including acupuncture (which worked sometimes), hormone-replacement therapy (which didn't help her at all) and various treatments from a physician in Burlington (which do help).

"There's a lot of snake oil out there," she said.

Even when the treatments are effective, the relief is often temporary.

But it provides a break from pain that is sometimes so bad, she says, she wants to throw herself off a bridge.

"You can't think, you can't see. It's horrible."

She has to remember to blink because it's no longer something she does without thinking.

Her eyes sting "all the time" and she has to use expensive eye drops.

She can only take tiny sips of the life she had before instead of joyous great gulps.

When she can tolerate light, she can't always read because she can't see all the words.

She doesn't go out much, because if she gets overtired, she might vomit.

As her role in the mask project, Theroux created a mask that was full of vibrant colour on one side — purple, scarlet, gold, with a white feather boa.

That's her old life, the one where she loved running her successful consulting business, went wherever she wanted and took her granddaughter for regular music lessons.

The other side, representing her life now, is a dull beige colour.

She chose that colour because there are no beige flowers.

"I used to be so animated and engaged," she said. "We had a super charmed life."

Under her mask, Theroux has written these words:

"I used to be vibrant, energetic, colourful. I brought magic to my family's world. Now I do not."

"I am like beige, colourless. Disconnected from my soul."

"I am not depressed. I am just like a fairy with wet wings."

"Someday they will dry and I will fly again. Maybe just not as high."

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