

SILVER LININGS HOPE PROJECT

by

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by

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Abstract

From survivors, for survivors, Silver Linings Hope Project is an art initiative sharing brain injury survivors' perspectives of hope to inspire the next generation of survivors and show why the recovery journey is worth undertaking. Presented through the Brain Injury Association of North Carolina's support groups, with the help of their caregivers and our team, willing participants each decorate a pair of silver glasses with their experiences of resilience, overcoming, and encouragement from their brain injury journey. Completing an accompanying write-up to tell their story, these silver glasses are then displayed at rehabilitation centers, future workshops, and online, to represent a collection of unique perspectives through which new or existing survivors can find strength. Starting in Eastern North Carolina, Silver Linings Hope Project has collected and shared over 80 survivors' stories and counting, since, as it continues to grow.

Artist's Statement

Two years ago, I couldn't distinguish wakefulness from dreaming. Struggling with memory or walking, the hardest part after my traumatic brain injury was the fear of my future. I remember searching desperately for hope. Then at rehabilitation, a resident physician with my doctor shared that he survived a traumatic brain injury "just like mine", but Dr. Ian turned injury into his source of strength. His story sparked hope, fight, and perseverance within me, to dedicate every day towards recovery. Hope is a powerful thing. If he could do it, I could too. I understand the power of this hope.

Art has held many labels in my life, during rehabilitation, it became my first place of healing. Completing rehabilitation to attend college, it is for this reason that as soon as I returned to campus, I was motivated to bring art's healing to others and joined the Art is Good Medicine

program at ECU Health's cancer center. Pushing the art cart through the chemotherapy infusion ward showed me how to share this healing with others, and I saw again and again how much confidence creating art brought to so many difficult moments. As art therapy patients became friends and my confidence in my ability grew, I remembered where I'd come from and recognized the support brain injury needed too. Not every brain injury starts with a story like Ian's, but drawing on the network of existing survivors to uniquely answer questions and give hope in a way no one else can, art's nature made it the perfect medium to share them and inspire needed confidence and hope. Ian's story is why I started this project, because each survivor's story may make the difference for the next journey, beginning now.

What initially began with an idea became Silver Linings when we got our first "yes" from a support group in New Bern. Preparing for months to present to fellow survivors whose lives had been changed drastically by their brain injury, I was nervous asking them to reflect on the hope they could share since their injury. I was surprised that everyone wanted to selflessly share the story of their hope. That day I made some lifelong friends and realized this was a project worth doing.

Presenting at many brain injury support group meetings since, Silver Lining's momentum continues to grow. Working with every survivor on their story of hope, each is for the next person like them. I'm often left inspired, and getting to share their journey's silver linings at rehabilitation centers, conferences, and survivor events means the world to me. Despite brain injury being an invisible struggle, watching people stop to read the stories and share them with others, I'm comforted knowing that this project is a success if it can touch even one person's journey. It certainly left its impact on me. I believe that life isn't over after brain injury, it's just your second chance.

Background and Context

Every 15 seconds someone suffers a brain injury in America (Perelman School of Medicine, n.d.). Traumatic brain injury is life changing, but not as a one-time event. Instead many brain injuries mark the start of a long journey having permanently changed a person's life (Dams-O'Connor et al., 2023). It's important to have strong support at all stages in the traumatic brain injury journey, but at no stage is it more critical in defining survivor outcomes than the period immediately following injury (Hart, 2011). From survivors, for survivors, this is when Silver Linings Hope Project's stories are intended to inspire the next generation of survivors and show them why the recovery journey is worth undertaking.

Silver Linings is an art initiative done in groups to share existing survivor's stories of overcoming their brain injury and thriving since, primarily with new and current survivors, but also their caregivers to show life doesn't end after brain injury, and the professionals serving them, to show the outcomes of their dedication. In collaboration with the Brain Injury Association of North Carolina, Silver Linings has been completed in its numerous Support Groups, which are compiled in a North Carolina database (Brain Injury Association of North Carolina, 2025), to create more than 80 survivor's stories of hope already, that have been presented and displayed at 5 conferences, events, and rehabilitation centers, including at ECU Health, with 3 more rehabilitation centers currently being planned.

To collect these stories, at each support group workshop I present Silver Linings to the group to explain why each of their inputs is uniquely valuable, and that every perspective may be the one which makes a difference, all while providing real examples of current survivor's stories, including my own. Understanding how difficult brain injury can be, participation is absolutely voluntary, but meaningful in its relatability at any stage in an individual's journey. Together with

their caregivers and my team of volunteer teaching artists, many of whom have art therapy backgrounds, we help survivors reflect on how far they've come and share their unique perspectives of strength through art's freedom of expression with a pair of decorated lenses, set in a pair of silver glasses, showing the advice they'd give their past selves for the next survivor who needs it most. Their silver linings.

Each participant who will complete a pair of glasses receives a kit which contains a pair of detached lenses that have been sanded and primed to be decorated, as well as their silver frames, and numerous mixed media art supplies (multi-color sharpies, pipe cleaners, magazines, felt, sequins, clear coat, etc.) to get started. The kit contains an ideas page, an instructions manual, and a media release form ensuring we can share their glasses and story, as well as their picture or video if they're willing. Each pair of lenses is completed with its Story of Hope, an accompanying write up explaining the glasses and sharing their survivor's unique story. After completion, the glasses and packet are either collected or photographed, and transcribed to be posted online and shared in-person on multiple, modular and movable, temporary display walls. Silver Linings is currently working on having an accessible digital collection of stories on the Brain Injury Association of North Carolina's website. Silver Linings Hope Project is inspired by, and collaborating with Unmasking Brain Injury, a survivor art project educating the community about brain injury. URCA funding has been acquired to pay for all necessary materials costs. Silver Linings' goal is to create a healing story exchange which empowers current and future survivors, while equitizing the intangible tool each survivor needs most. Hope.

Key Words

Traumatic Brain Injury Rehabilitation, Hope, Healing Art

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