

One mom's prescription for recovery after her son's traumatic brain injury

Mother's love helps brain-injured son

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After eight years the Scharmer family has developed a sense of humor about Mario Scharmer's brain injury.

Not to say they take it lightly. Just that they've developed a perspective that helps them laugh.

It stems from doctors telling Mario's mom, Christine Scharmer, that her son was going to be in a persistent vegetative state after he crashed his truck while driving drunk.

Now, if you ask them what sort of vegetable Mario is, they like to jokingly say, "Celery."

Mario is hardly a vegetable. He is a walking, communicating 26-year-old who, his family says, has a lot of love to give.

"He's a miracle," says Christine Scharmer, who wrote "Raising Mario Twice" about her son's continuing recovery. The self-published book, available for \$16.95 at www.RaisingMarioTwice.com, details

Mario's accident and the first few years of his family's ordeal helping him get the right medical care for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

According to statistics from the Brain Injury Association of America, about 1.4 million Americans annually sustain an injury that affects the brain and 3.17 million currently have a long-term or lifelong need for daily help as a result of TBI. Mario typifies one of those 3.17 million sufferers. Young men between 15 and 19 years old are among the most at risk for TBI.

Mario's is a cautionary tale of recklessness. It's also a guide — full of ideas like building "sensory kits" for sense recovery and managing the intricacies of scheduling visits — for families taking care of brain-injury patients. Lastly, it's a story about how love can heal.

"Miracles happen every day with Mario," Scharmer says. "It is a book of miracles and how to live your life despite the challenges that come your way."

Mario was an 18-year-old aspiring model and massage therapist in 2002 when he spent the evening drinking with his buddies at an East Bay house party, then by a fire pit at San Francisco's Ocean Beach. When he crashed his pickup truck into a pole on a darkened, two-lane street near his family's Martinez home, his blood alcohol content was .223. A person with .08 in California is considered legally too drunk to drive and can be arrested and fined.

His mother had spent most of her working life teaching young children, kindergartners at Pleasant Hill Elementary School and second- and third-graders at Valhalla Elementary, also in Pleasant Hill. Looking back, she says she feels like all her life experiences — including organizational skills, faith

and a community of friends and family — helped prepare her to deal with Mario's healing.

After the crash, she and Mario's adopted father, Mark Scharmer, spent the next 21 days visiting Mario at the hospital while he was in a drug-induced coma. She says she used the hospital's heart monitor to figure out how Mario was feeling. A high heartbeat meant he was in pain or suffering. A calm, low heartbeat came when she and other loved ones were in the room and interacting with him — by reading, singing or using the sensory kit — while he was still in a coma.

It seems silly now, she says, how worried she was about his broken femur. That injury, Scharmer recalls thinking, might prevent him from snowboarding, which he loved.

"I thought he was going to wake up and he was going to be fine," she says. "I was in so much denial."

She didn't know that Mario's form of TBI would mean that she and his caregivers would have to teach him everything again, including eating and crawling. And they still have talking and walking fully upright to go. One day, his mother says, Mario will be able to live on his own, perhaps hold a job or do his own laundry. But that's the future.

For now, it is apparent that she, too, has gone through a tremendous upheaval. It's not enviable, for sure, but it has confirmed her faith in love's healing power.

"I was able to channel help and love to him," she says.

Her dedication hasn't been ignored by Scharmer's

closest friends, including her neighbor, Kristine Carlson, author of "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff for Women."

"Christine grieved about the accident like anyone would," Carlson says. "But she fought for Mario from the moment one of the doctors told her that he would be a vegetable."

Though Mario is only semi-verbal — close family can understand his speech — he understands others and uses a computer to communicate. His mission, he says, is to spread the love his mother showed him. He and his mother also are victim-impact speakers for Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

In the living room of their sunlit home, Scharmer recites a poem that Mario wrote. It asks others to pray for love and spread love "like a virus."

When she reads this short paragraph, Mario shakes and smiles. He kisses his fingers, blowing kisses, really, and true happiness can be read on his face.

"We need to celebrate the moment," Scharmer says. "That's what Mario has taught me: Celebrate the moment."

Christine Scharmer
book signing 3 to 5 p.m. March 20, Orinda Books, 276 Village Square, Orinda; 925-254-7606 10 a.m. to noon April 3, Cafe Heavenly, 3116 Oak Road, Walnut Creek; 925-939-8218 3 to 5 p.m. May 8, Barnes & Noble Books, 552 Contra Costa Blvd., Pleasant Hill; 925-609-7060.-