

# 'Visitors' Changing Lives One Story at a Time

It's hard to imagine being able to walk away from an accident or medical trauma, only to discover you have a brain injury. Memory loss, personality differences and physical impairments can all be part of recovering from such traumas and all forms of brain injury caused by a stroke, aneurysm, abscess, tumor, disease, anoxia, bleeds, surgery, etc. Until now, patients and families have had few resources to deal with these issues.

But the caring hearts of NCH volunteers and staff at NCH Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging & Rehabilitation are changing that with the Brain Injury Peer Visitor Association, which has been in place since August. It was developed at the urging of Brookdale Administrative Director Heather Baker and NCH Director of Volunteers Amanda Smith.

Christopher Thomas is one of the first brain injury peer visitors in the NCH program. The gifted artist survived a motor vehicle accident several years ago. Now, after NCH Rehab Case Manager

Lois McSweeney-Ventura identifies a patient who can benefit from the program, Thomas is one of the visitors who shares his story and answers questions.

"Patients and their families will say after an injury, 'Well I'm walking and I'm talking, so I must be okay,' but that is not often the case," says Thomas, who was hit head-on by another motorist. "It is like waking up a different person and trying to remember the person you were."

The Brain Injury Peer Visitor Association was founded and inspired by Brain Injury Peer Visitor and Association Director Ann Boriskie. Her involvement stems from her own brain injury. Like Chris, she survived a tragic accident, later realizing her brain injury.

"When Amanda and Heather first started talking to me, I could tell they were really committed; and the Brookdale Center is very loving and warm, but incredibly professional," says Boriskie, who traveled from Georgia to train the NCH peer visitors. "People like Chris and I didn't get brain injury help and we had to find our way out into the world—our job as peer visitors is to make it easier and immediately educate the patient and families."

Part of the program includes a packet of information.

Baker and Smith hope the community will come together to support the growth of the program.



*"Clockwise from top left, Chris Falco, Greg Minck, Christopher Thomas, Susan Berg, Paula Arizmendi and Ann Boriskie"*

**For more information call The Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging and Rehabilitation at (239) 552-7222.**