

Traumatic brain injuries affect everything in your life
By Marianne Frontino McCreight, December 5, 2015

Sandee Rodriguez will celebrate her 21st birthday on Jan 4, 2016. Again. She doesn't remember the first one. After her traumatic brain injury (TBI), it may as well have never happened.

Rodriguez (then Rager) was the keynote speaker for an Eastern Michigan University (EMU) journalism class on Nov 12, 2015. Rodriguez, a 2006 EMU journalism major, wants to give back to the students of her alma mater.

On Jan 4, 1995, Rodriguez (then Rager) was 24 years old and loving life. She was a student at Henry Ford Community College and one semester away from graduating and she was active in theater there. She had a long-term boyfriend, a couple of jobs, and was close to her family and friends.

But on the way to her friend's house at 11:00 that morning, she had a major car accident that left her in a coma with little likelihood of survival. In addition to multiple smaller injuries, she had a broken pelvis, seven broken ribs, a punctured lung and the traumatic brain injury that left her with the retrograde amnesia she has today,

"The person in the mirror wasn't me and I didn't like her either. But, I looked beyond the mirror and slowly became the person I am."

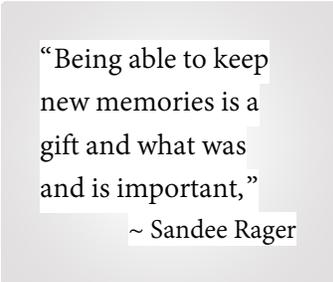
~ Sandee Rager

The 21st anniversary of the accident is cause for celebration, Rodriguez said. She wasn't expected to wake from the coma or live. When she did, the doctors said she probably wouldn't walk again. But they didn't know about her drive and tenacity, her

family says. She was walking unassisted by Easter that year.

Now she is planning a formal dinner out with her husband to celebrate how far she's come. With very little memory of her life before the accident, she plans to make it a celebration much like what she envisions she had for her prom or her first 21st birthday. There are photos and stories from her family, but that's not the same as having lived it. And Sandee wants to live.

According to the NIH, someone in the US suffers a brain injury every 15 seconds, and every five minutes, one of those people will die. Every year, 52,000 people in the US die of a TBI, and it is the most likely type of injury to result in death or permanent disability.



“Being able to keep new memories is a gift and what was and is important,”
~ Sandee Rager

Rodriguez was able to leave the hospital seven weeks after the accident, but it took many more months of intense therapy before she was able to take care of herself. Her memory problems included episodic, semantic, and declarative memory deficits. Her procedural memory, how to do things, was the least damaged. Rodriguez says she was constantly frustrated by the inability to recall words or be able to express or control her emotions.

“Sometimes I didn't understand what words meant. I didn't understand sarcasm and I didn't know how to take a joke,” she explains. One day when her mom said “it's raining cats and dogs outside,” she ran to the window to see. Although her mother thought it was funny, she just felt stupid, she explains.

In addition to their memory and emotional problems, TBI survivors have an increased incidence of depression and anxiety, according to an article in the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry*.

When asked about her memories returning, Rodriguez explained to the EMU students that it can be a very confusing and emotional experience. Describing how she's noticed her senses seem to trigger memories, she related the story of going to her cousin's wedding a few years ago and spending the whole ceremony crying because she was reliving her grandmother's funeral, which took place in the same church years before.

Estimates from the Centers for Disease Control list the number of people hospitalized with TBI each year at 260,000, with 70,000 to 90,000 of these cases becoming permanent. They also report that TBI survivors are at three times greater risk of a second injury and that number goes up to eight times greater for a third.

Rodriguez described the sensation of the slow-returning memories as being "like puzzle pieces and they put together a picture eventually." The hard part, she says, is that, "Each memory I get, I may have to relive it again, emotionally. So that pain or guilt or turmoil I had at that experience, I go through it again."

The difficulty in controlling the emotions is a physical result of the TBI.

"I've had people tell me to get over it or move on." But she says she has learned that, "if you hang on to the past, you die a little each day." And her life motto is *Carpe Diem*—*Seize the Day*.

These days, Rodriguez says she takes care of her dogs, which she is registering as emotional support animals because they help with her anxiety and panic attacks, and she works on the blog she started with Jason Ahlquist, marsdust network, which is a genre blog that is transitioning to a streaming TV network for Roku and Google but still does reviews of books and movies, etc., in the sci fi, thriller, horror and fantasy genres.

Rodriguez extended the offer to all EMU writing students to become guest posters on marsdust network blog. She will even make arrangements for live interviews with people for students to write for the blog. This opportunity to help out the students is one she says she loves.