



# BRAIN Waves

Good Vibes from the Arkansas Brain Injury Community

VOL. 6, Issue 3 Fall 2024

## A FAREWELL TO KRISTEN



Kristen Alexander, MPH, MPS

The UAMS IDHI Brain Injury Program would not be what it is today without its people. One of those people, Kristen Alexander, has been a driving force for Arkansans affected by brain injury. Kristen has moved to a new position, so we wanted to recognize her impact over the years.

Kristen’s work spanned the entire program, including assisting with the grant proposals that fund the BIP, producing the first 5 years of the Brainwaves newsletter, and creating the Arkansas Brain Injury Resource Guide. She also founded a Music Therapy program, managed the state’s brain injury registry, collaborated across the state to strengthen school resources, and planned events and educational programs. Kristen will be most missed by the brain injury community, including the leaders and survivors. As we bid a fond farewell and wish her well with her future endeavors, we would like to share some beautiful sentiments people had to say about her.



Amy Goddard, PhD: “Kristen has been an essential cross-agency team member for creating better policies, which have not only raised awareness but has also made a real difference in the lives of families across Arkansas. Kristen’s passion and innovation are truly inspiring, and her efforts to bring resources and stakeholders together will have a lasting impact on how we support children with brain injuries in our state. I can’t wait to see the impact she will have in her new role!”

Chrystal Fullen, Psy.D: “Kristen is one of the smartest women I know. What makes her unique is that she pairs her knowledge with genuine caring, charm, humor, an eye for solutions, and a really great memory!”

Melissa Weitekamp: “I have had the privilege of working alongside Kristen since the beginning of [what is now] known as the Brain Injury Program. She provides a safe space for brain injury survivors and their caregivers to feel validated and is always willing to think outside of the box to offer solutions to any potential barriers they may be facing. Her impact is not just measured in her programmatic achievements, but in the many lives she has positively influenced through her passion and tireless efforts.”

Jan Williams, TBI Survivor: “Kristen shouldn’t step away without feeling satisfied about the positive arc her influence has added to every part of the Program—and the significant difference it has meant for me as I continue to probe and prove (she’d want me to admit the word ‘provoke,’ too) my way forward.”



Suggest a topic! Email us at [braininjury@uams.edu](mailto:braininjury@uams.edu)

## BRAIN INJURY TEAM



**Renee Joiner, RN, BSN**  
*Clinical Program Director*



**Danny Bercher, PhD, NRP, CBIS**  
*Director of Operations*



**Eddie Williams, RN, BSN, CBIS**  
*Assistant Director*



**Sheila Beck, MSPT, CBIS**  
*Clinical Operations Coordinator*



**Gayla Caldwell, BS**  
*Administrative Coordinator*



**Dianne Campbell, LCSW**  
*Social Worker*



**Brandi Dawson, MS**  
*Health Educator*



**Jonelle Tindall, BS**  
*Administrative Coordinator*



**Constance Tullis, LMSW**  
*Social Worker, Peer Support Lead*



**Amber Watson, MBA**  
*Program Manager*

# SURVIVOR STORY: CAROL ANN COLLIER

AS TOLD TO BRANDI DAWSON



According to Google, the word “grit” is defined as a strength of character possessed by individuals who demonstrate passion and perseverance toward a goal despite being confronted by significant obstacles. Right beneath that definition should be a picture of Carol Ann Collier.

Carol Ann Collier’s story is an inspirational one of perseverance, faith and the unbreakable bond of love between a mother and her sons. On the morning of February 28, 2010, Carol Ann lit a candle in her house and hopped in her car to drive a short distance to pick up her youngest son Jared so they could go to church. Unfortunately, Carol Ann would not make it to Jared, or back home to blow the candle out.

Her world turned upside down in the blink of an eye. While headed to get her son, Carol Ann was involved in a life-altering, near-fatal

*Carol Ann enjoying one of her favorite activities, hiking.*

*Page 4; Enjoying life under the waterfall in her town of Heber Springs.*



*“A wheelbarrow and a shovel...”*  
- Carol Ann Collier

car accident. The force of the impact broke seven ribs and shattered her first and second vertebrae, leaving a shard of her first vertebrae in her second one. The trauma caused her bladder to burst, her spleen to bleed, and her left lung to fill with blood, making it almost impossible for her to breathe. What should have been a 10-minute car ride became a lifelong journey of resilience, defying the limits of human endurance and showing the power of unwavering determination and faith.

Jared, who was 12 years old at the time, arrived at the hospital believing his mother was dead. While Carol Ann may not have died, her old life did — and her new one began. While in the hospital, she endured intense and relentless pain. The smallest movements were agony. During an adjustment by one of the nurses, Carol Ann's shoulder fractured, resulting in excruciating pain. Even though this new injury added to her suffering, it only strengthened her resolve. Despite the pain, she requested the removal of her morphine pump. While the pain medication dulled her agony, it clouded her mind. Carol Ann wanted all her mental fortitude to face the oncoming battle of recovery. She was resolute in her determination to get better for her sons.

Carol Ann began the painstaking process of recovery. Each day presented a new set of challenges, but she was dedicated to regaining her independence, starting with the smallest tasks. She lowered the rails on her bed and used one of the room's high-backed chairs to inch her way to the bathroom. She was determined to wash her face and brush her teeth. It was a monumental effort but marked the beginning of her new life.

Carol Ann's road to recovery was paved with multiple surgeries, but she never felt sorry for herself. Her doctor told her if she could walk down the hall and back, he would let her go home. Just two and a half weeks after her first steps to wash her face, Carol Ann headed home with just a walker and a neck brace.

Carol Ann's faith in God and devotion to her sons gave her the strength needed to rebuild

herself. They returned her love with their own. Her son, Caleb, came home from the military, where he was a member of the United States Air Force, to join Jared as Carol Ann's full-time caregivers. They were her anchors, providing the encouragement she needed to keep going,

even at the hardest moments. Faith and family became Carol Ann's pillars of recovery, providing her with strength and peace that carried her through her darkest days.

At this time, Carol Ann was on seven medications. She proceeded to wean herself off of these medications because she knew they were not right for her. Carol Ann had no health insurance at the time, and the medications were expensive and caused problematic side effects. Even though Carol Ann was in severe pain and could barely move, she was so determined to be independent that she grabbed a wheelbarrow and a shovel and proceeded to start her own

recovery regimen while also homeschooling Jared until he graduated high school.

During her recovery, Carol Ann also learned yoga from her son, Caleb's friend and began doing it three or four times a day. Over two weeks, she graduated off her walker to two canes, and eventually one cane. Six weeks after leaving the hospital, Carol Ann was able to remove her neck brace, stop using the cane, and begin doing her normal chores both inside and outside of the home. She also began cooking again, which has always been her passion. Even today, you will see her often feeding her community in Heber Springs.

Carol Ann acknowledges how much her sons gave up to become her full-time caretakers. "Caleb would push me to do things I thought I could not and cheer me on because he knew I could do it, and Jared took on the mental challenges, which was hard," she said. Jared and Caleb said that their mother's recovery had its ups and downs. Although it was often raw and painful, they never stopped loving her and came to respect her even more. "Neither child ever got upset with me, but they showed such love, patience and continued support through our 13 and a half years without a support group,



*Carol Ann with son, Jared, and her two best friends, her furbabies.*

*Continued on page 4*

Continued from page 3

or understanding of what a TBI was,” Carol Ann said. “My sons stuck by me like glue and never complained. We have laughed, cried, forgiven, loved and played hard.”

Thirteen years after her initial hospital stay, Carol Ann was finally able to get health insurance and received the professional care she needed all along. She also found the UAMS IDHI Brain Injury Program and credits its support as the reason her sons can now go back to living their own lives. Both Jared and Caleb have been able to return to their careers. Although they are both gone for extended periods of time, they still talk with Carol Ann every day.

Carol Ann’s journey from the brink of death to a life full of adventure is a testament to the unbreakable human spirit. Her determination and the love of her family turned a nightmare into a story of inspiration. “I never believe in quitting,” she said. “Forward motion is what I say. You may need to rest, but after that, get up and let’s go.” From not being able to walk to hiking waterfalls and being a powerhouse advocate in the TBI community, Carol Ann has faced the unimaginable and emerged stronger, a beacon of courage and perseverance for us all.



## TEAM MEMBER *Spotlight*



**S**heila Beck, MSPT, CBIS is the Brain Injury Program’s clinical operations coordinator. She joined the Brain Injury Program in November 2023 after serving on the TBI Advisory Board Workgroup from 2019-2021.

During her 31-year career as a physical therapist, Sheila’s experience has included working with children who sustained moderate-to-severe injuries, as well as working with adults who needed neurological rehab. She has worked in acute care, inpatient rehabilitation, home health and outpatient settings, often in rural areas. Sheila also worked in the state’s public school system for nine years. Following her time there, she went to work for Easterseals Arkansas Children’s Rehabilitation Center and obtained her Certified Brain Injury Specialist (CBIS) certification through the Brain Injury Association of America. In the past, she sat on the Arkansas Governor’s Commission on People with Disabilities. She currently holds a position on the Increasing Capabilities Across Network (iCAN) Advisory Board.

Outside of work, Sheila has been married for 31 years and has two grown children. Her hobbies include traveling and listening to audiobooks. True crime podcasts like Dateline are a guilty pleasure. She also enjoys riding her mountain bike in the woods with her dog, Porter. She is active in the St. Joseph’s Catholic Church of Center Ridge, where she plays the organ and helps with parish activities.

Suggest a topic! Email us at

 [braininjury@uams.edu](mailto:braininjury@uams.edu)

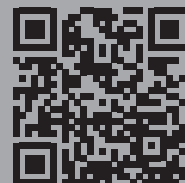
# NEW SUPPORT GROUPS!

are coming to a town near you.

**Support groups are being expanded to new areas including:**

- Heber Springs
- Bentonville
- El Dorado
- Mountain Home
- Fort Smith

**To learn more, visit:** <https://tinyurl.com/4rdke9fm>



**If you have any questions, email [braininjury@uams.edu](mailto:braininjury@uams.edu)**



## CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR NEW ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

**Eddie Williams, BSN, RN, CBIS**, has been with the Brain Injury Program for five and a half years, filling the role of nurse educator for the team. Truth be told, Eddie has done so much more than what was expected of him in that position. For that reason, along with many others, Eddie was recently promoted to the program's assistant director. Help us wish him a hearty congratulations!

Eddie collaborates with health care providers around the state to provide outreach and support for those individuals living with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and other significant trauma. He also participates in the medical management including telemedicine usage, education best practices, patient care module development, and professional webinars.

Eddie began his medical profession as an inner-city paramedic with the Memphis Fire Department. He later obtained his RN license,

with a focus on emergency and critical care. As a travel nurse, he gained experience in large and small hospitals around the country with a memorable experience as part of a trauma team in Las Vegas. He has received accolades from the emergency departments at UAMS and Duke University Medical Center for making a positive impact in the lives of his patients and coworkers. Eddie constantly strives to improve the lives of recovering patients through advocacy and education.



## Brain Injury Program

The UAMS IDHI Brain Injury Program is part of the Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. We are the lead program for brain injury in Arkansas and our services are free.

### WHAT WE OFFER:

- Case management
- Telemedicine
- Community resources
- Support groups
- Online workshops
- Recovery groups
- Quarterly newsletter
- Education for professionals

### BRAIN & SPINE CALL CENTER

- (855) 767-6983
- Free and available 24/7
- Available to TBI & SCI patients, their family, caregivers & providers
- Speak with a nurse in real time about TBI & SCI health related questions

[idhi.uams.edu/brain-injury-program](https://idhi.uams.edu/brain-injury-program)



**TBI SPP**  
Traumatic Brain Injury  
State Partnership Program

SCAN  
TO  
LEARN  
MORE



(501) 526-7656 | [BRAININJURY@UAMS.EDU](mailto:BRAININJURY@UAMS.EDU)



# SOCIAL SECURITY VIDEO CONNECT: CONNECT WITH US FROM ANYWHERE

By Tonya Cater, Social Security Public Affairs Specialist



We continue to find ways to make doing business with us easier. With our Social Security Video Connect option, you can conduct business with us using video on your personal device, from your preferred location.

Social Security Video Connect is available for:

- No-change replacement Social Security cards (U.S. citizens only).
- Date of birth corrections (U.S. citizens only).
- Benefit applications.
- Redeterminations.
- Overpayments.
- Medicare.

## How to get started

To get started with this new service, you will need a computer, tablet, or smart phone with a webcam and internet access. Once you have your device, please complete the following steps:

1. Contact your local Social Security office or call 1-800-772-1213 between 8:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., Monday through Friday

to schedule a video appointment. A representative will determine if a video appointment is appropriate for you. If a video appointment isn't appropriate for your needs, we can conduct the interview over the phone or in the office.

2. Provide your email address and phone number to receive an email with a link for the Microsoft Teams meeting.
3. Connect with us using that Microsoft Teams meeting link on the date and time of your appointment.

If you run into issues with Teams or need to reschedule your appointment, please contact your local Social Security office or call 1-800-772-1213.

We strive to improve our customer service and increase the ways you can connect with us. Please share this information with your friends and family who may need it – and post it on social media.



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- [www.instagram.com/uams\\_idhi\\_bip/](https://www.instagram.com/uams_idhi_bip/)
- [www.facebook.com/arbraininjury](https://www.facebook.com/arbraininjury)

The IDHI Brain Injury Program offers a disability resource website to connect those with trauma-related disabilities to helpful resources and organizations in the community.

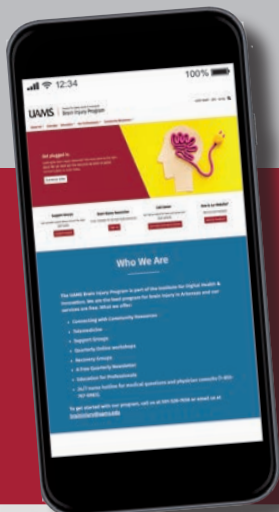
To access the disability resources website, go to:

**<https://idhi.uams.edu/brain-injury-program/>**

We also offer a 24-hour nurse call center for people with a brain or spinal cord injury, their caregivers, or medical providers. Call anytime with questions about your health, symptoms, or medical care.

To access the call center, call:

**1-855-767-6983**



For more information about the disability resource website or the nurse call center, call **(501) 526-7656** or email **braininjury@uams.edu**

*The nurse call center is a partnership of the UAMS Institute for Digital Health & Innovation and the UAMS Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and is funded by the Brain Injury Program.*

