



BRAIN waves

Information, Support, and Stories That Matter

2026 | Issue 1



Constance Tullis, LMSW
*Social Worker
Peer Support Lead
UAMS IDHI Brain Injury
Program*

SURVIVORS SUPPORTING SURVIVORS

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to share how survivors can advocate for one another. Months ago, almost a year, really, I emailed the City of Conway on behalf of a fellow peer survivor so he could walk safely to his gym. I explained how important that walk was to him and why a sidewalk mattered, especially after he shared in our support group a frightening encounter with a car on his way there. The city responded with reasons they could not extend the sidewalk due to code restrictions. Still, I knew how much pride he took in staying fit after his injury, and how meaningful that independence was to him.

I met with this peer to discuss sharing his story in our cognitive rehabilitation workshop. I hadn't been to Conway in a long time, and to my surprise, there was now a sidewalk exactly where I had once sent a photo suggesting it. Seeing his excitement and pride was incredibly rewarding. He is always there to support me through my own TBI challenges, often turning

my frown upside down and those moments remind me how powerful peer support truly is.

Since my injury, I have always dreamed of helping others, never realizing that passion would lead me to graduate school for social work and eventually to my role as a social worker with the UAMS Brain Injury Program. Chrystal Fullen, Psy.D., has departed UAMS but has entrusted me to serve as her peer lead for her workshops and everything else she facilitates. I strongly believe every survivor needs a survivor contact person. As I often say, "I can't give support if I don't have support." There is something irreplaceable about connecting with someone who has lived through similar emotions and experiences.

Peer support survivors are the navigation tools for those early in recovery. Dr. Fullen, myself, and a few others have authored a peer support manual. The shared lived experiences are the theme of peer support. Currently, Dr. Fullen has also launched a brain injury peer support program at Baptist Health, helping survivors find purpose through meaningful bonds with others who truly understand. These connections help survivors grow more confident in their own recovery.

Having an experienced survivor as a contact
(Continued on page 2)

person is like free therapy by offering emotional support, encouragement, and validation. Simply acknowledging emotions such as fear, frustration, and sadness can make a profound difference. Experienced survivors listen, validate, and share their own journeys, helping new survivors feel understood and less alone. We offer coping strategies for managing symptoms, navigating rehabilitation, and handling emotional challenges (many of which I still face). By sharing our resilience and recovery stories, we instill hope and show that progress is possible.

Experienced survivors also serve as role models and mentors, demonstrating flexibility, perseverance, and growth. We guide others in navigating life with a TBI, accessing resources, advocating for their needs, and setting realistic goals. Ultimately, our role is to empower new survivors to find and share their voices. TBI survivors have powerful voices. Together, we can make a meaningful impact by advocating for one another, raising awareness, educating communities, influencing policy, supporting research, and building strong peer support networks. Through connection and shared experience, we help each other heal and thrive.



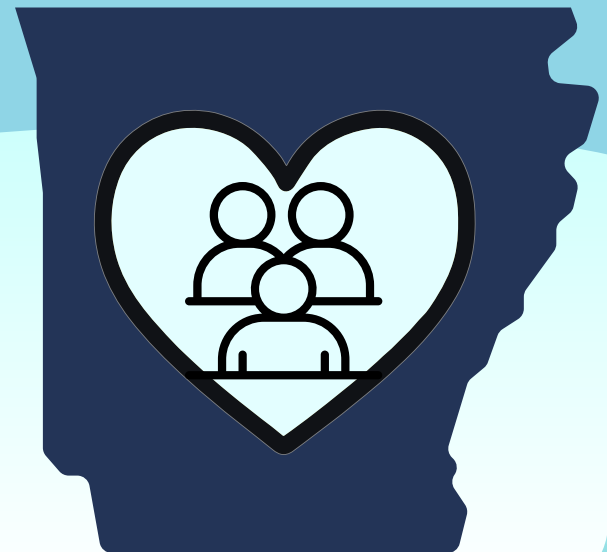
Constance Tullis graduating with her MSW degree

ARKANSAS BRAIN INJURY COUNCIL

The mission of the ABIC is to engage, integrate, inspire and advocate for brain injury stakeholders to help achieve the Statewide vision for brain injury policies and services throughout Arkansas.

The ABIC consists of positions for people living with brain injury as well as positions for professionals that serve the community.

LEARN MORE



MEET THE TEAM



Eddie Williams, RN, BSN, CBIS
Assistant/Interim Director



Sheila Beck, MSPT, CBIS
Clinical Operations Coordinator



Gayla Caldwell, BS
Project Manager



Dianne Campbell, LCSW, CBIS
Social Worker



Brandi Dawson, MS
Health Educator



Jonelle Tindall, BS
Administrative Coordinator



Constance Tullis, LMSW
Social Worker, Peer Support Lead



Amber Watson, MBA, CBIS
Program Manager

SURVIVOR STORY: FROM TRAGEDY TO TESTIMONY

The Luke McKnight Story

AS TOLD TO BRANDI DAWSON



Once a college athlete with a promising future defined by confidence, ambition, and achievement, Luke McKnight's life changed in an instant. Now, he calls that moment the beginning of his real story — one anchored in faith, his true purpose, and gratitude for another chance.

Under the bright lights of the baseball field, Luke used to measure his life in innings, not moments. His world moved at full speed, filled with practices, friends, and the ambition of youth. "I was living the fun life," he says. "College baseball, good shape, good friends — it felt like everything was going exactly the way it was supposed to."

Growing up, Luke saw things that made him promise himself he'd never fall into certain habits. "I saw people in my life struggle with drugs and alcohol," he explains. "I told myself I wouldn't go down that road. I didn't even want to touch any of it when I was younger."

But like so many stories of adolescence, the line between conviction and curiosity began to blur. One day, when he was just 14, a friend offered him marijuana. “I remember thinking, it’s not drinking, right? So maybe it’s okay.” That small rationalization — the kind that feels harmless in the moment — became the first of many.

Later, alcohol entered the picture. “I told myself it was fine as long as I didn’t drink and smoke at the same time,” Luke said. “I had all these rules I made for myself so I could still feel like I was in control.”

By high school and college, the rules didn’t matter as much. “I started drinking more, getting high more often. I was still in the best shape of my life. You’d never look at me and think I was making bad choices,” he says. “But deep down, I knew God didn’t want me living that way. I felt it every time — that little voice telling me, ‘This isn’t what you’re meant for.’ I just wasn’t ready to listen.”

The Night Everything Changed

That voice grew impossible to ignore on the night his entire life changed. In February 2023, Luke had been at a college party, with music, laughter, and the easy confidence of a young man who believed his future was guaranteed. “I drank. I got high,” he recalls. “And that night, I got hit by a car going 34 miles an hour.”

He pauses. “They told me later that it killed me.”

The crash left Luke with a traumatic brain injury — the kind that changes everything in a heartbeat. “One moment, I had plans for the weekend, for my life, he says. “The next, I was in the hospital, and I couldn’t walk, couldn’t drive; couldn’t even imagine playing baseball again.”



The recovery was grueling. Physical therapy, long days, slow progress — and the dawning realization that the path ahead would never look like the one behind. “It was humbling,” he says. “I had always relied on my body — now it didn’t respond the same. But even then, I started to see God’s hand in the details. The fact that I was alive at all — that was grace.”

Luke’s recovery moved faster than anyone expected. “Doctors told me it would take longer, but I started getting stronger sooner than we thought,” he says. “Every step, every word that came back, I just thanked God for it. I realized I’d been given a second chance.”

Faith at the Center

Today, Luke’s life looks nothing like it used to — and that’s exactly how he wants it. “Everything I do now is for God,” he says. “I’m in church seven days a week. Bible study, worship, community. It’s what fills me up.”

Faith isn't just a comfort for Luke; it's the foundation for every part of his recovery. "The accident stripped away everything that didn't matter," he says. "I don't care about the things I used to. I care about purpose — about who I'm becoming."

When he talks about his journey, his eyes light up — not with pride, but with gratitude. "People tell me I inspire them, but really, I'm just trying to live the way I should've been living all along. I should've been dead. Instead, I'm here. That's God."

Luke's message to other survivors is simple and powerful: don't give up. "Whatever you're going through — whatever mistakes you've made — God's not done with you," he says. "You can still have joy. You can still find peace. You can still start again."

"I lost baseball, but what I gained was everything. I gained faith. I gained real life."

A New Kind of Strength

Luke McKnight's story isn't about perfection or pain avoidance — it's about redemption through awareness and surrender. "I used to think strength meant how hard you could hit or how far you could run," he says. "Now I know strength is waking up every day and choosing gratitude. Choosing to live differently."

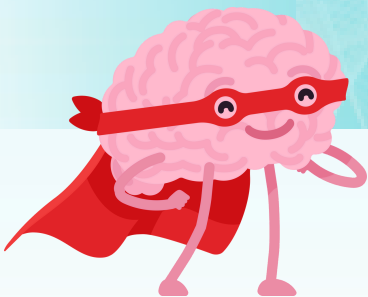
He doesn't shy away from the lessons of his past. "I wish I could go back and tell that 14-year-old kid that fitting in isn't worth losing yourself. But I can't. What I can do is live my life now in a way that maybe helps someone else make a better choice."

Faith gave Luke the courage to rebuild, and purpose keeps him steady. "If my story helps even one person find God, then it was all worth it," he says.

Luke McKnight's journey reminds us that recovery isn't about returning to who we were — it's about becoming who we were meant to be. Through his faith, grace, and resilience, he continues to prove that the most powerful comebacks begin in the heart.

If Luke had just 3 things to say to new TBI survivors, here's what he would say to them, in his own words:

- "God loves you and he has called you."
- "Do not lose hope, and take advantage of all of the blessings God gives you."
- "Whatever skill you get back or you have now, take advantage of it, start to perfect it, and apply it to a job."



Want to share your story?

EMAIL US AT BRAININJURY@UAMS.EDU

Farewell to Danny!



Danny Bercher, Ph.D., NRP, CBIS, started with the Brain Injury Program in 2018. He brings over 40 years of experience in Emergency Medical Services, including 10 years as a paramedic with MEMS in Little Rock and North Little Rock and two years as a flight paramedic with Baptist MedFlight. He later joined UAMS as an EMS instructor and served as EMS department chairman for 18 years before transitioning to the Brain Injury Program at the UAMS Institute for Digital Health & Innovation.



Danny enjoys spending time with his wife, Anita, of 24 years, and their children, Eva and Nathan. Family trips to national parks and long day hikes are among his favorite activities, with one final big family trip planned before the kids are fully off to college. An aspiring deacon in the Catholic Church, Danny values faith, prayer, and transcendental meditation. He also enjoys reading and is always on the lookout for exercise that keeps him healthy without being too painful or boring.

A Word From Danny

Most people work to put food on the table. The work we choose can be meaningful or simply something we endure. Without a doubt, the last seven years with the Brain Injury Program have brought enormous joy to my life. I am grateful to have served in a role that positively impacted some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our society. Our program helped pass two legislative bills and was recognized by UAMS as the Team Impact Champion for 2025. We also earned the respect of the National Association of Head Injury Administrators (NASHIA), which selected Little Rock to host their national conference in 2026. These accomplishments were not due to my efforts alone, but to the dedicated commitment of our team, for which I am deeply grateful. Their tireless work has moved the needle for our brain injury community through clinical advocacy and education for providers, survivors, and families. We have built a network of support groups, offered the first cognitive behavioral therapy workshops, and helped establish some of the first peer mentors for brain injury in the country. Our education efforts now extend to law enforcement, judicial professionals, and the domestic violence community. I am excited for the future of the Brain Injury Program and believe our impact will continue to grow.

Sincerely, Danny Bercher

You Will be Missed!



UPCOMING EVENTS

BIP PRESENTS



Featured Topic:

Brain Games with Neurosize

Featured Organization:

Reinventing Ourselves

Thursday, February 19, 2026

12:00 – 2:00 PM CT

Online



RSVP:
[tinyurl.com/
BIPFEB19](https://tinyurl.com/BIPFEB19)

2026 ARKANSAS BRAIN INJURY SURVIVORS' DAY

March is Brain Injury Awareness Month, and that means it's time for our annual celebration! Let's come together to raise awareness and honor your journeys.

Friday, March 27, 2026

9:30 – 3:30 PM CT

Little Rock, AR

RSVP:
[tinyurl.com/
SDAY2026](https://tinyurl.com/SDAY2026)



Professional Educational Opportunity

SOS: STATE OF THE STATES IN BRAIN INJURY CONFERENCE

August 31–September 4, 2026
Little Rock, Arkansas



[NASHIA.org/
SOS2026](https://NASHIA.org/SOS2026)

Join us in welcoming NASHIA's 37th annual State of the States in Brain Injury conference. SOS continues to bring state leaders together, alongside brain injury support/education organizations, partners, researchers, and providers.



UPCOMING EVENTS

LOVEYOURBRAIN: LEARNING LABS

Learning Labs are LoveYourBrain's **online workshop series** exploring topics central to brain injury healing. Led by **Kyla Pearce, Ph.D.**, senior director of programs & research, each workshop features conversations with leading experts, practitioners, and doctors across varying fields. Together, they explore key insights and practical tools to support your unique healing journey from brain injury, including concussion.

**[Loveyourbrain.com/
learninglab](https://loveyourbrain.com/learninglab)**

LOVEYOURBRAIN: SUMMIT

**Advancing the Science and
Practice of Holistic Healing after
Brain Injury**

March 20–22, 2026

A three-day online global conference uniting visionary leaders, clinicians, people with brain injury, and caregivers to explore emerging, evidence-based holistic therapies—from neurofeedback and trauma-informed mindfulness to gut-brain health and non-invasive brain stimulation.

**[Loveyourbrain.com/
summit](https://loveyourbrain.com/summit)**

BOOK CLUB!

TURNING PAGES TOGETHER EBOOK CLUB

Held Online Every Thursday @ 10:30 a.m.

This is an adapted, virtual eBook club for survivors of traumatic brain injury. This eBook club is adapted with audio/visual chapters and the books are specific to TBI. This eBook club is co-hosted with the UAMS Brain Injury Program.

ReinventingOurselves.org/ebook-club

MORE THAN A BOOK CLUB: CREATING CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY AFTER BRAIN INJURY

WRITTEN BY: BRANDI DAWSON

When the UAMS Institute for Digital Health & Innovation Brain Injury Program (BIP) launched its virtual book club, the goal was simple but meaningful: to create a space where people living with traumatic brain injury (TBI) could learn, reflect, and connect with others who truly understand their unique experiences. After seeing how impactful similar book clubs had been in other states, I strongly advocated for bringing this model to Arkansas. What has unfolded since then has exceeded every expectation.

The aptly named Turning Pages Together book club has seen consistent participation from TBI survivors, with regular weekly attendance and deep engagement. It meets virtually once a week, removing barriers related to transportation, fatigue, or geography. While Arkansas residents are prioritized for receiving books, the book club itself is free and open to participants nationwide, reflecting our belief that meaningful connection and education should not be limited by location. The connections formed through the book club have already inspired survivor-led initiatives, including a developing nationwide TBI survivor pen pal program being created in collaboration with the Brain Injury Program by one of the participating survivors.

The first book selection, *To Root and to Rise: Accepting Brain Injury* by Carole Starr, set the tone for what this space would become. The book offered language and insight around acceptance, identity, resilience, and growth after brain injury. Survivors saw



themselves in the pages. Discussions moved beyond surface-level coping strategies into honest conversations about grief, frustration, faith, relationships, hope, and healing.

What emerged was something deeper than a typical support group. While support groups are essential, the structure of shared reading created a common foundation that allowed participants to open up in ways I have never witnessed before. The conversations were raw, thoughtful, and brave. There were moments of laughter, moments of silence, and many moments of tears. Participants shared stories they had never shared before. The book club became a place where emotions were not rushed or minimized, and where every experience was treated with respect.

Leadership has been central to this success. The book club is guided by Tanya Phillips and Constance Tullis, both TBI survivors, whose lived experiences brings authenticity, empathy, and trust to each session. (Continued on page 10)

Tanya, health wellness coach and the founder of the 501c3 nonprofit Reinventing Ourselves, has donated mass amounts of her time to create video readings of the books so anyone who would like to participate is able. The group is also supported by guest moderators, many of whom are survivors, creating a powerful peer-led environment where participants feel seen and understood rather than instructed or corrected.

One particularly meaningful moment came during the final session of *To Root and to Rise*, when author Carole Starr joined the group as a guest. She spoke directly with participants about her writing, her journey, and what she is currently working on, including her upcoming book, *Silver Learnings: Practical Wisdom for Living with a Brain Injury*, which will also be featured in a future book club session. For many participants, hearing directly from the author who had helped put words to their experiences was deeply affirming and emotional.

The next chapter of the book club begins in January with *From Setbacks to Comebacks: Don't Try It Alone!* by Keith Handcock, an Arkansas TBI survivor. Featuring the work of a local survivor adds another powerful layer, reinforcing the message that recovery, purpose, and leadership can emerge from lived experience. Keith's story reflects resilience, honesty, and the importance of community, themes that align perfectly with the heart of this book club.

At its core, Turning Pages Together is about connection. It is about creating a safe, welcoming space where survivors are not asked to explain or justify their experiences. It is about honoring emotion, encouraging growth, and reminding participants that their voices matter. What started as an idea inspired by other states has grown into a meaningful, healing community, and it continues to evolve with each page turned together.



Are you Interested in Joining the Book Club?

The book club is free and open to brain injury survivors nationwide. The group meets virtually once a week and is designed to be a supportive, judgment-free space where participants can join at their own pace. The Brain Injury Program provides the books at no cost to participants, with Arkansas residents given priority for receiving copies.

If you are interested in joining, simply reach out to us for more information or to sign up. You do not need prior book club experience, and you are welcome whether you feel ready to talk or prefer to listen. This is a space created for survivors, by survivors, and you are welcome here. Whether you are newly navigating life after a brain injury or have been on this journey for years, you are welcome to join us as we read, reflect, grow, and turn the next pages of life together.

Contact Information

Brandi Dawson
bdawson@uams.edu
501-526-7656
[Contact Us Form](#)



SUPPORT GROUPS

Brain injury support groups provide a safe space for survivors to connect, share experiences, and learn strategies from others who truly understand. They reduce isolation, build hope, and offer encouragement throughout the recovery journey.

Online Survivor Group:

Meets every Tuesday
1:00 to 2:00 p.m.

Online Caregiver Group:

Meets 1st Monday of each month
2:30 to 3:30 p.m.

BHRI Support Group

In-Person at BHRI
2nd Wednesday of the Month
11:30am to 1:00 p.m.

Looking for more support group options?

Find support group details, sign-up information, and a list of current groups on our website: idhi.uams.edu/brain-injury-program

FEATURED RESOURCE



The Telecommunication Access Program (TAP) provides specialized telecommunication equipment to eligible Arkansans who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, or who have a speech, visual, mobility, or intellectual impairment. TAP strives to remove telecommunication barriers through the delivery of adaptive communication technology.



(501) 686-9693



arktap.org



ars.tap@arkansas.gov

Connect with Us!



(501) 526-7656



braininjury@uams.edu



idhi.uams.edu/brain-injury-program



instagram.com/uams_idhi_bip



facebook.com/arbraininjury

Brain & Spine Call Center

1-855-767-6983

**Have a brain or spine related health question?
We have nurses on call 24/7!
It's completely FREE!**

This is not for emergency services. For emergencies, call 911

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.

