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Injured musician plays to new beat Ex-patient offers music as therapy

BY LORA GRINDLAY, THE PROVINCE APRIL 26, 2010 COMMENTS (2)

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Mark Ash practises at the Canadian Mental Health Pathways clubhouse in Richmond.
Photograph by: Les Bazso, PNG

This is the fifth of six profiles on this year's recipients of the Courage to Come Back Awards. The awards recognize those who have overcome great adversity to help others. The recipients will be honoured at a gala dinner at Vancouver's Hyatt Regency Hotel on May 6.

Today's recipient is in the physical rehabilitation category.

In the mid-'80s, Mark Ash was in a rock band that played some of Vancouver's biggest stages.

They had a song on the radio, he had some money, a large home in Richmond, a beautiful wife and two kids.

He produced compilations of Vancouver bands and lived the party

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"I thought I was a rock star," said Ash, 46.

But to the "new" Mark Ash, those accomplishments pale to what he's accomplishing these days, following a massive brain injury in 2001.

Ash is a devoted volunteer music therapist, working with people with mental illness and brain injuries.

Whether he's leading exercises to increase hand and finger strength or playing bass and encouraging clients to sing, he can be found a few times every week offering up the wealth of knowledge he's gleaned from his own remarkable recovery.

"I get to share and I get to give people hope and inspiration," he said.

Ash was a passenger in a car that was rear-ended by a truck and he suffered a traumatic injury to the left side of his brain.

He was left unable to speak, hold a pen or peel a piece of fruit. He lost his sense of balance to the point where he could hardly walk.

"It was like being trapped in my own body. Up here, I could think and rationalize," he said, pointing to his head. "My body just didn't work."

For a year he lived with his dad and did very little except waste time in front of the television.

"I was so sad, I didn't want to go on. I thought, 'That's over, it's all done for me.' I was doing so well and now look at me," he said.

On a suggestion from his mental health team in Richmond, he joined a Canadian Mental Health Association program.

That led to moving to a group home and becoming active in CMHA's Pathways Clubhouse in Richmond. It was there that he was shown kindness, he said, and not the pity he had grown used to.

Ash began spending two hours a day, seven days a week at the gym, trying to increase blood flow to his damaged muscles.

He kept up his therapy, despite being covered in bruises from falling and bumping into things.

Eventually, he learned to speak Russian, his first language, followed by English. And he listened to music, often for hours every day.

"All I could do was listen to music, so I listened for two years non-stop," Ash said.

Ash exercised each finger for hours a day, and immersed his arms and hands in hot water to loosen his muscles before playing guitar, something he still does today.

Eventually, he encouraged other CMHA clients to join in and started a band at Pathways called Reality Check that performs his music.

"Everybody wants to be a rock star," laughed Ash.

He also leads a therapy program at G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre

from The Province.

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and is part of a music program for brain-injured clients at Headway Centre.

"I give people hope. They look at me and say it's possible," said Ash, who now lives independently in his own condo.

"It's not the hand your life dealt you. It's how you play your cards."

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