

Brain injury survivor shares humor, tools to cope with tragedy

By DAVE RICHARDSON Chronicle Staff Writer

If you've been alive for a while, you know life throws a lot of curve balls. Ask Lois McElravy. She's living proof. Being a brain injury survivor wasn't on McElravy's list of things to accomplish in life. She was minding her own business one day 16 years ago, driving to work. She took a detour to a nearby bakery. And life threw her a hard curve. A utility truck smashed into her from behind hard enough to break all of her teeth. She also ended up with a traumatic brain injury that left her a shell of the woman she was the day before. She started having big problems with her memory, with being able to stay organized and keep dates, times and places straight. She couldn't focus long enough to read a book, this woman who before that day had been a successful entrepreneur, a sales and service representative for 15 companies at once. "You go from being someone who could do so many things at once all the time to being someone who can't fold a dishrag without supervision," she said from her home in Missoula Thursday. "It's a tough spot to be in." McElravy sometimes wanted to give up. She spent the first eight years after the accident "just existing." "I'd plug the sink and turn the water on, then I'd walk away and forget about it," McElravy said. "Or I'd put detergent in the washing machine and turn it on without putting the clothes in. It was a wonder I didn't burn the house down." Her family — a husband and four children — watched helplessly as she suffered in endless frustration. Often, she said, she wanted to just go to sleep and not ever wake up again. But she didn't. She kept swinging.

Today, she's not just existing anymore. She's thriving. She's gone from being virtually helpless to living an extraordinary life, offering help, comfort and smart ideas to others who have had their lives turned inside out by trauma and chaos so they can do the same.

At 7:30 p.m. on Sept. 20 she'll be speaking at Eagle Mount in Bozeman, sharing the story of how she managed to beat the odds and hit one out of the park.

"We can get hooked into feeling hopeless, and think things are never going to change," McElravy said. "But it's when you least expect it that wonderful things will happen."

For McElravy, finding creative strategies to cope with her condition became a passion. She started taking a medicine for ADD, which helped.

She also embraced the power of positive thinking, especially humor, as a way to get around the negativity she saw holding herself and others back.

Now, she spreads a message of hope and possibilities to people all over the state who need it most.

"Being a victim of something like this forces you to acknowledge your limitations, but it's also an opportunity for the enjoyment of your days, and of the simple things, to increase," McElravy said.

The Eagle Mount talk will be hosted by the Brain Injury Support Group of Bozeman, a group founded in 1984 by Leonard and Rosemary Healey of Belgrade. The group's current chairwoman, Mary DiBernardis, suffered her own brain injury at the hands of a drunken driver.

Talking to McElravy, you'd probably never guess what happened to her. She's still injured, and she still has plenty of problems. She just doesn't let them run her life anymore.

"Often when people meet me, they don't believe I have a brain injury — but if they spend half a day with me, they start scratching their heads and wondering," she joked.

"I just try to tell people it's OK to dare to feel happiness in the midst of chaos."