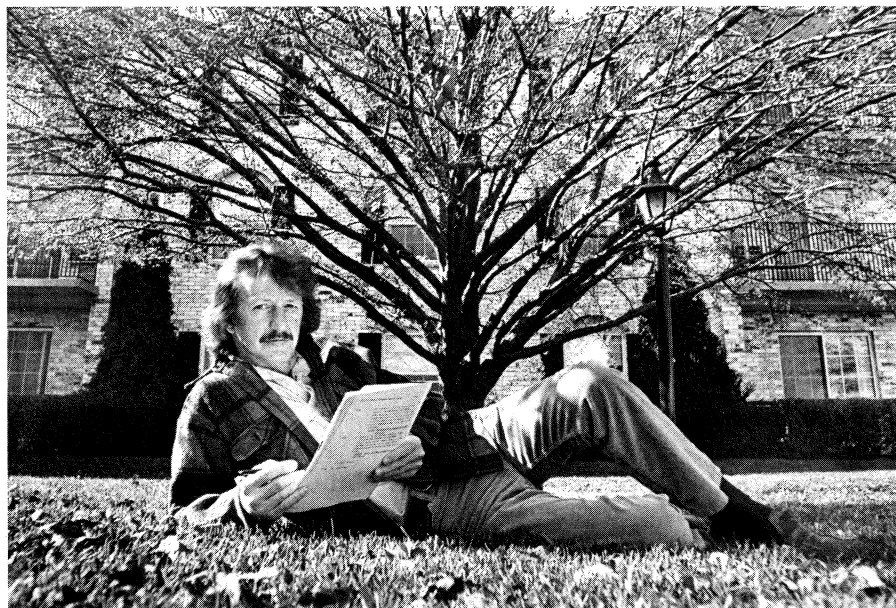


The Words To Say It

Gunshot victim John Tracy struggles to give brain-injured persons a new voice



John Tracy: Working on behalf of the brain-injured.

A native of Ferndale, Michigan, John Tracy was raised in Charleston, Illinois. During the eight years he served in the Air Force, Tracy also attended college and received an associate degree in art.

After the service, he attended the University of Illinois, where he earned a degree in journalism. Following graduation, Tracy worked a brief stint with World Book Encyclopedia in Chicago, where he was an assistant editor. He then returned to Charleston as a managing editor of the Coles County Daily Times-Courier.

From there, Tracy went on to work for six months at the Ottawa (Illinois) Daily News as a managing editor.

He joined the Beloit Daily News in 1976 as managing editor. "I had 17 people under me," he says, "but I had no time for my own writing, and I wanted to get back into it." So in January of 1979, Tracy joined the Milwaukee Sentinel as a reporter.

The following December — the 16th — during a Christmas party at the Knew Boot Tavern in West Milwaukee, bar patrons were caught in the middle of a fight between two rival motorcycle gangs. Tracy was shot in the head. The bullet, from a 9mm Luger, passed through another patron's body, killing the man instantly, and then entered Tracy's brain, where it lodges to this day.

"It was 1:15 a.m.," Tracy says. "Damn it, I should have been in Madison. Here

[Madison], the bars close at 1 o'clock."

Following the shooting, Tracy was in a coma for two months. When he was finally able to return to work, Tracy couldn't handle the reporter's job and the Sentinel eventually terminated him. "All I've ever wanted to be," he says, "was a writer."

Tracy, 46, is now divorced. (His two daughters live with their mother in Florida.) He writes on a video display terminal on behalf of the state's brain-injured people, while continuing to undergo therapy. "I'm a full-time volunteer and advocate for brain-injured people. Across the country, there are 50,000 new brain-injury cases every year — in Wisconsin, a thousand."

"I had numerous problems when I came out of the coma. My left eye was blind. I couldn't sleep on my left side because of the pain — to this day I have to sleep on my right side — and I couldn't move my jaw because they had been feeding me intravenously — the jaw was frozen.

"I didn't have any words anywhere. I couldn't come up with, 'I am thirsty' or 'I'd like some water,' or anything like that. So I used gestures and made a tipping motion with my left arm.

"At the same time, I didn't understand what the nurse was saying when she asked if I was thirsty, so she used gestures, too.

"After I left intensive care and was in a regular bed, I started undergoing physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech pathology.

"When it came to learning from scratch, the one thing that really struck a chord was 'Sesame Street' on television. The voice would say, 'This is a "G," as in giraffe, as in garage.' Boy, I would try to concentrate on that and learn that 'G.'

"Meanwhile, I had my hospital ID wrist tag and it took me two full weeks to learn my own name: J-O-H-N. God, it was frustrating. The nurse would say it for me and I would have to concentrate, and within 15 seconds, 30 seconds, it would be gone.

"It took a long time. I graduated from 'Sesame Street' and went on to 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood.' It was re-learning from the bottom all over again.

"When I talk to you now, I'm talking in behalf of so many other people who have undergone the same damn thing that I'm undergoing — as far as rehabilitation is concerned.

"After I left the hospital in February — and this is a major point for all of us — I went to the Curative Workshop in Milwaukee — I think it's called the Curative Rehabilitation Center now — as an outpatient on a daily basis. I was told in November that

there was nothing else they could do to rehabilitate me. I had reached a 'plateau,' a 'flat level of learning,' and I couldn't learn any more. I would be leaving the workshop. That would be it.

"Well, I was obviously upset. I asked, 'What do I do now?' and they said, 'Nothing.' I asked, 'Where can I go?' and they said, 'We don't know.'

"My sister called around the country for a place: New York, Denver, I think Los

there's no doubt in my mind that I would be in a nursing home or I would be in an institution.

The VA Hospital is the one thing that saved me — and Jay Rosenbek, of course. He's one of the finest in the country and I was very lucky.

"He's my age. I like to say we grew up together, me in central Illinois and Jay in central Kansas.

"He graduated from college as an English major and taught school for several years before he went into speech pathology. With his background as an English teacher and with mine in journalism, it was fantastic. It still is today. I was on a daily basis with Jay until June of this year when we went to a once-weekly get-together.

"The reason is much of the therapy in speech pathology today is going on by computer. At the VA Hospital, I would say 98 percent of the people undergoing speech pathology are people who have had strokes. They can't speak, so to get information across to them, they use computers.

"At the *Sentinel*, I had used VDTs — Video Display Terminals — so I was very lucky. I used a computer at the VA Hospital and now I have one here in my apartment.

"The computer helps me recall the vocabulary I once had. You know, my speaking today appears normal, sounds relatively normal, but the problem is being able to receive messages and send messages through words.

"Brain-injured people 'lose' words and that's why the medical field and Dr. Rosenbek are looking beyond speech now. They're looking at the loss of words.

"I can go out to a restaurant and read the menu: TODAY'S SPECIAL: STEAK. I close the menu. I tell the waiter I want the special and when he asks me how I want it done, I'll say, 'over easy.' He waits and then it comes back to me eventually.

"The computer helps me recall the words. All I've ever wanted to do in my life is use words. All I've ever wanted to be is a writer.

"When I went to the *Sentinel*, it was because I wanted to write again. I did things like becoming a derelict for two days, looking for quarters, winding up on the railroad tracks with the other derelicts. We drank a lot of wine and I came back and wrote about that.

"Once, I went up in a plane with a stunt pilot. It was absolutely fantastic. I did it because I could get the messages out, all the feelings out to all of the people who were reading the paper. What a great feeling that is.

"Now, I'm sitting here and I'm thinking, 'I got shot in the head.' God, was I lucky, because I have so much information now about the brain and brain injury, and as a reporter, I'm excited. I've always been seeking other information.

"Now, my concern is first and foremost:

"It was a laboratory in Madison. I was a guinea pig. That was okay. I didn't care about that, as long as something is going on."

Angeles. There was a report in the paper, a press release on brain injury. It was about the neuropsychology laboratory.

"So I went and talked to them — this was November of 1980 — and when January '81 rolled around, they accepted me.

"It was a laboratory in Madison. They were learning from me. I was a guinea pig. That was okay. I didn't care about that. As long as *something* is going on, by God, *that's* what was so important. I was there six months.

"In the summer of '81, they suggested that I contact the Veterans Administration Hospital in Madison. I had been in service — thank God! — so I said okay. That's when I met John Rosenbek, the chief of speech pathology at the VA Hospital. He is commonly referred to as Jay. He accepted me and I got on a whole new routine.

"Now, all this time I'm still with the *Sentinel* — they had cut my pay by \$150 a week, but I didn't quit because I couldn't afford to quit — and all the six months I was going to neuropsychology lab at the VA Hospital, the *Sentinel* said that was okay. I'd just get on a bus, go to Madison and come back.

"With the VA Hospital and Jay Rosenbek, my routine was: Twice a week I'd take the bus from Milwaukee, go over to Madison for therapy and be back in Milwaukee that night.

"I would be in therapy for probably three hours each time, which creates extreme stress, and normally, people with brain injury cannot quite take it all in. They become exhausted.

"Well, I was in that therapy from the summer of '81 until the *Sentinel* terminated me in 1982. At that time, I moved to Madison and became a daily client at the VA Hospital as an outpatient.

"I'll tell you, if I hadn't been in service,

brain-injured people in Wisconsin and getting their stories out.

"You know, people shun the whole subject of brain injury. My God, the brain. It's a gloppy little thing, weighs three pounds, and nobody knows what happens within, inside there. The whole subject now is like it used to be with cancer.

"Nobody ever wanted to talk about cancer because if a person had cancer, that person was dead. Now the same thing is

"The brain. It's a gloppy little thing, weighs three pounds, and nobody knows what happens inside there."

happening with brain injury.

"Well, we have to talk about it. We have to do something about it. We need rehabilitation of brain-injured people.

"Too often they are regarded as 'mentally retarded' and put in sheltered workshops, in nursing homes, in institutions.

"I don't know if the VA Hospital in Madison is a model for brain-injured people. I do know that the State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation sure isn't.

"Statistics show that brain-injured people have a life span that's only two years less than normal.

"That means that since most brain injuries occur in young men between 16 and 26 years of age, they are going to live *another 50 years*.

"That's the factor we have to consider: 50 more years of life for each brain-injured person — 1,000 new cases every year in Wisconsin.

"Rehabilitate those people! For 10 years, if necessary, rehabilitate, because you're going to have real dividends in the end. If you don't rehabilitate them, then you're going to dole out that money all of your life.

"Also, what is happening today is that there are more and more brain-injured people surviving because the medical profession is keeping us alive. So the brain-injured population is expanding and expanding to the point when everybody will say, 'We've got to do something. We've got to stop this because the taxpayers can't afford it.'

"What I'm trying to do is just get the word 'brain injured' into our state statutes. We need to get it in there so it's recognized as a fact of life, and we can go from there.

"It makes me angry that we are so ignored and misunderstood in this state.

"Here I am. I get social security disability income. I am still undergoing therapy. I'm

still working toward my goal of becoming a functioning writer again. And I do not like the winters in Wisconsin.

"I could live in Bermuda and my income would be the same — it doesn't make much difference — but the reason I stay here is because of my involvement with brain-injured people.

"When we lived in Milwaukee, Melanie [his wife] and I were with the Wisconsin Brain Trauma Association when it was formed in 1980 — and then it was primarily Melanie forming the Milwaukee Area Self-Help group — for people with brain injuries and their families.

"Now we have, I think, eight support groups around the state — Green Bay, Eau Claire, La Crosse — all those places.

"You know, when a person becomes brain-injured, the family, in the long run, may have more stress than the person with the injury.

"The person with the brain injury may well have lost a lot of memory, but the family remembers, and oh boy, it is so devastating.

"That's why I want rehabilitation. I think not even the medical profession has the feeling for what can happen to a brain-injured person in rehabilitation. I don't think we've scratched the surface of what people can do.

"Rehabilitation doesn't have to mean re-

turning the person to what he was. It could be becoming something he never was before.

"All my life, before the brain injury, after the brain injury, all I ever wanted to be was a writer. I was dedicated to being a writer,

"The computer helps me recall the words. All I've ever wanted to do in my life is use words. All I've ever wanted to be is a writer."

but there was one time after the shooting when I wavered and I was afraid. If I'm not gonna be able to be a writer, now what the hell am I gonna be able to be?

"So Melanie contacted the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music and I went. They accepted me. I was going to be a singer. What the hell. If I can't write, I'll sing.

"I underwent becoming a singer — for months. I didn't finish the whole program because actually my writing had picked up again and I did not have that fear anymore,

and so I kind of dropped out of singing.

"But to me, that is what people have to look at when they look at the whole broad area of what is going on in rehabilitation.

"My next move would have been into art work — doing art. You know, if I can't speak very much, if I can't come up with proper language, if I cannot write at all, if I cannot read at all — I can still do art work.

"I was just not going to give up. That's silly, to give up. What the hell are you gonna do if you give up? You're not even going to exist.

"You take a person who does not even understand what's on television, does not understand what's on radio, cannot take in anything like that, cannot come up with any words. That still doesn't mean that the person can't do anything.

"There are things that a person can do and art work would be a prime activity as long as that person is able to move his arms or paint with the brush in his mouth.

"And of course, if worse comes to worse, I knew a person could always become an editor. That is true.

"That is what I decided when I was with the *Sentinel* — you know, I probably will never be able to be a reporter here again, I was thinking — the only thing that I could really be able to do here was to be the editor.

"Now that's rehabilitation." ■

CHANTILLY

