

Man overcomes Brain Injury to complete Race

Three years ago, Carlos Mixson died. On Sunday, he ran a race.

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As the gun sounded Sunday afternoon, the milling crowd of runners began snaking down Congress Avenue. Carlos Mixson [pictured right] broke into a light jog, his right leg a little unsteady but his stride strong.

Every precaution had been taken to ensure that Mixson would navigate the 6.2-mile course safely. But his mother and his therapist still worried. He might take a wrong turn or overheat. There was no guarantee he could do this.

But they saw every step as a defiance of guarantees.

After all, it was only a mile from the starting line, almost four years earlier, where Mixson had died.

On April 18, 2005, the 27-year-old Mixson had been drinking just east of downtown with some of his fellow pedicab drivers. He and his longtime girlfriend – also the mother of his 2-year-old son – had just broken up. He headed home on his bicycle early in the morning.

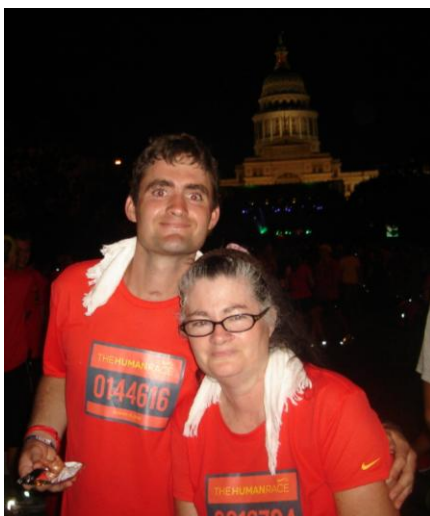
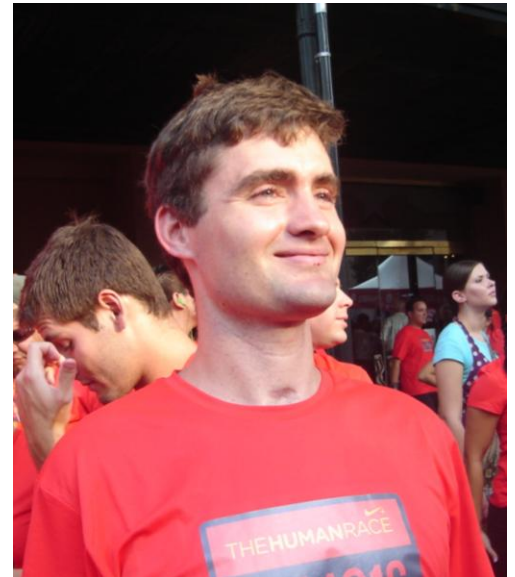
At 3:29 a.m., records say, he ran a red light and crashed into the left side of a police cruiser. He flew 30 feet and struck the pavement with his head.

His major organs - heart, lungs, stomach - shut down. Medically, he was dead.

Medics arrived minutes later and put him on life support. Machines began breathing for him, pumping his blood, stimulating his brain.

His life was saved. But no one knew what kind of life it would be.

Mixson's ex-girlfriend saw footage of the crash scene on the morning news and recognized his bicycle. A few hours later in



Columbia, S.C., his mother, Toni Rockwell [pictured left with Mixson], got the news. She drove to Atlanta, boarded a plane and arrived in Houston the next day.

When she walked into Brackenridge Hospital's emergency room, she found her son hooked into a maze of wires. One was draining blood out of his right side, where a broken rib had pierced his lung. His mutton chops, thick mustache and long dark hair were dotted with specks of dried blood.

"I went numb," she said.

For decades, medical science held that, once damaged, the brain loses much of its ability to form new neural pathways, the connections necessary for thought and action. Adult brains, it was thought, struggled to regain even the most basic skills when injured.

Whatever progress her son made in six months to a year, Rockwell was told, was where he would be for the rest of his life.

Life for Rockwell became nights spent sleeping on the couch of her son's ex-girlfriend, 99 cent .Jack in the Box tacos and the constant search for a place she thought would give him proper care.

Eventually, she found a retirement home that agreed to take him. Mixson was about three decades younger than the rest of the residents.

Rockwell herself put him through exercises a therapist at Brackenridge had taught her. By September 2005, he could stand and could make it to the bathroom if someone supported him.

Despite the physical progress, Mixson still struggled emotionally. One evening he stood up at the dinner table and started screaming. A nurse instructed him to sit down. He grabbed her and shook her, hard.

That night, Mixson was asked to leave.

Like many communities, Austin has a shortage of beds to care for people with brain injuries. But Rockwell found a brain-injury support group and learned how to navigate the system. Texas NeuroRehab Center let Mixson stay free for a week until a check from the state arrived.

Later, at a small North Austin house near Seton Medical Center, Mixson met therapist Hope Young [pictured right with Mixson]. At the time, he couldn't bend his right leg. He rarely spoke, and when he did, his voice was a monotone. His face displayed no emotions.

Young used music as therapy, saying she believed it could reach damaged areas of the brain and restore the sound track by which the body coordinates its thoughts and movements.

After two weeks, Rockwell and Young recalled, something clicked. Mixson's herky-jerky movement snapped into a relatively smooth walk.



A few weeks later, Mixson started talking, which led to laughing. Then he started remembering.

One day he mentioned he liked the song "Born to be Wild." "It reminds me of my days on the road," he said.

Was Mixson beating the odds, or had the odds been miscalculated?

Recent research suggests the brain is more elastic than previously believed. Neuroscientists say they are developing more sophisticated therapies that they hope can stimulate the organ's ability to recover.

Mixson can't explain the science. "I just keep getting better," he said.

In October, Young tacked a photo to her office wall of her patients who'd completed the American Heart Association Heart Walk. Mixson was in it. The next race, Mixson told Young, he would run.

He started running three days a week with a group that was training for the Nike Human Race 10K. Rockwell and Young decided to run with him.

When the starting gun sounded at 6:30 p.m., Mixson began jogging down Congress Avenue, giving high-fives to spectators and grinning.

The announcer occasionally called out the names of runners as they finished. One hour and 23 minutes after the race began, the announcer boomed, "Now finishing: Carlos Mixson."