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## Starting from scratch to rebuild a broken brain

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By **LILLIAN TUCKER**

*UW News Lab*

Why is funny funny? Why is sad sad?  
Why does sense make sense?

To Matthew Mayo, these questions had no answers. At age 25 his physical address was in Kirkland but he lived in a self-proclaimed hell. A severe brain injury two years earlier had chipped away his mental acuteness, eventually abandoning him in a world that made no sense. The simple task of suggesting dinner to a friend became impossible.



Dr. Richard Corbeil works through the Feldenkrais method with brain injury patient Matt Mayo at his home studio off on Finn Hill.  
Matt Phelps, Kirkland Reporter  
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“That was what pissed me off the most, I know up here what I wanted to say but I can’t translate that into movements. I can’t talk to you. I can’t make you smile,” said Mayo. “I was in a cage in my head, peering out through the bars, looking at the world. Just being quiet.”

Mayo’s last memory was of riding his 2005 Suzuki GSXR 750 on Aug. 6, 2005. He wanted to be a professional motorcycle racer and was on his way to visit his cousin in Gig Harbor. Three months later he awoke from a coma. He had been in a wreck that had broken both shoulders and 90 percent of his ribs, which punctured his lungs and a kidney; the right side of his brain had torn from the skull, the two halves shifted and his right front lobe tore in half.

After a four-month hospital stay Mayo went home to start from scratch. With the support of family and friends who had once watched him pull off tailslides and double kickflips on his skateboard, Mayo began to re-teach himself how to walk. And, 16 months after the crash, Mayo found a girlfriend.

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“Skateboarding is just figuring out how to teach yourself stuff,” he said. “Instead of breaking down a skateboard trick, I am ‘breaking down’ my body.”

Just as he was seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, however, his world went black.

“It was a reflex to be myself,” said Mayo. “After a year-and-a-half that slowly started to go away. All the hardware in my brain, it was so damaged. I didn’t know who I was anymore.”

Mayo refers to this as when he went “crazy.” He no longer knew how to express himself, his intentions did not match his actions, short-term memory was fading and his emotions went rampant. He was disoriented mentally and physically. Friends pulled away. Communication became impossible and so did maintaining a relationship.

“It was hell on earth. I just kind of crawled in a hole because I didn’t understand. Nothing made sense to me. I was like a little rat in a cage. I would just sit in the corner. I was just examining life and trying to figure it out again.”

Mayo put his loneliness to work. He spent hours playing around in his head, he said, trying to make connections. He researched the brain, worked at memory, cognitive and hearing exercises and remade his brain’s speech maps starting with how to make a P-sound, making his way through the alphabet.

“Matt was basically a lost case when he came to me,” said Richard Corbeil, a Feldenkrais practitioner in Kirkland who has worked with Mayo for the last two years. When he was told by the medical community that he may never fully recover, Mayo totally refused to be put in that box, Corbeil said. “He took charge of his own process, organized his own recovery.”

Mayo read about Feldenkrais, a healing method, according to [www.feldenkrais.com](http://www.feldenkrais.com), that focuses on the relationship between movement and thought, where increased mental awareness and creativity accompany physical improvements.

“Any kind of neurological and orthopedic injuries Feldenkrais helps because it basically upgrades your movement habits and optimizes them,” said Corbeil, describing it as a learning process that taps into the brain’s ability to regenerate itself. “The brain can actually heal itself but you need to be able to stimulate it.”

Mayo is humble about the fact that he now runs, can carry on a conversation for several hours, and is no longer just a patient but is training to become a Feldenkrais practitioner. And for the first time since before his crash, Mayo moved to a place of his own last week.

“Everything that sucked still sucks. Everything works or doesn’t work,” he said.

“Anything that doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, you know. That is exactly what I needed. I’m glad it happened. Now I actually have a direction I want to go in my life.”

Corbeil adds: “I’ve had success with other people recovering and going back to their lives. But they just go back to their lives. The difference with Matt is that he took it and is still running with it.

“He can reach people on a more gut level because he himself went through this process and found a way out of it.”

### Feldenkrais Training

Seattle Eastside Feldenkrais Training (SEFT III) will offer two make-up intensive sessions for those interested in joining SEFT III’s Professional Feldenkrais Training on March 1-26, 2010 and Feb. 15-26, 2010. For more information, contact Angel Di Benedetto at [adiben@aol.com](mailto:adiben@aol.com) or 425-820-0399, or visit [the web site](#).

*Lillian Tucker is a student in the University of Washington Department of Communication News Laboratory.*



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