



Olympia Marine's recovery from traumatic brain injury featured in film to air on KBTC



Iraq War veteran Jason Poole became the face of traumatic brain injury after being featured in a New York Times front-page story. He is now one of four individuals highlighted in the PBS documentary *“Going the Distance: Journeys of Recovery.”*

BY MOLLIE GILMORE

When he talks about the day he was critically injured by a roadside bomb in Iraq, Jason Poole of Olympia is casual.

“I was blasted,” he says often and easily, or “I got blown up,” in much the same tone someone else might say, “I started college” or “I moved to Washington.”

He has no memory of that day — June 30, 2004 — but he knows that his life was profoundly and irrevocably changed. The blast broke every bone in his face and sent shards of metal through his skull, causing a traumatic brain injury that affected his ability to think, read and remember.

Poole's story and those of three other TBI survivors are told in David L. Brown's award-winning 2017 documentary *“Going the Distance: Journeys of Recovery,”* airing Tuesday on KBTC.



Jason Poole before his injury. (Photo courtesy of Jason Poole)

Brown wanted to tell inspiring and hopeful stories of survivors of traumatic brain injury.

“What impressed and inspired me about Jason were his spirit and courage,” the filmmaker told *The Olympian*. “I was moved by his experience and his determination to create a new life that was meaningful.”

“I'm very positive,” said Poole, who moved to Olympia with his wife, Angela, in 2011. “I'm a happy-go-lucky person.”

The tale of Poole's recovery, a recovery that continues to this day, is truly a creation story — a re-creation story. “An injury to the brain is an injury to the essential self,” Brown wrote on the film's website. “One of the film's therapists explains that TBI survivors ‘have to reinvent who they are.’”

On the morning of June 30, 2004, Poole was a 23-year-old Marine corporal — handsome, gregarious and full of fun.

He was on patrol near the Syrian border when the bomb went off, killing three of his fellow soldiers and nearly killing him, too.

He lost his left eye, the hearing in his left ear and much of the strength and dexterity of his right side.

He lost the face he'd always seen in the mirror. He went through 13 reconstructive surgeries to give him a new and less symmetrical face, but one that's illuminated by the same big smile.



Jason with Iraqi children (Photo courtesy of Jason Poole)

He spent nearly two months in a coma and more than a year in a rehabilitation center at the veterans' hospital in Palo Alto, California.



David L. Brown filming Jason Poole for "Going the Distance."
(Photo courtesy of David L. Brown Productions)

"I'd forgotten everything," he said. "I was just like an infant. I didn't know how to poo, pee, eat, sleep, talk. They had to reprogram in my head to do all that stuff again."

He lost the woman who'd been waiting for him while he served, though the two remain friends.

"I did have a girlfriend when I was normal, and then I got blown up," he said. "She said she couldn't take it."

So many losses left him "very, very depressed — very, very, very depressed," he said.

"But then maybe four or five months (after the bombing), I looked in the mirror. I couldn't talk, but I said, "Jason, you're going to work harder than hell. You're going to be the nicest good person, and you're going to ask for help."

He realized that there were things he hadn't lost, including his love of

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connecting with people and his desire to share his life with someone.

In 2006, not long after leaving the rehabilitation center, he met Angela Eastman — now Angela Poole — at a friend's home in nearby Mountain View, California.

It wasn't quite love at first sight. When Eastman asked him about himself, Poole turned and walked away.

It wasn't personal. "It was very hard for me to speak," he said. "My mind was just overloading talking to someone."

Despite the awkward start, the two struck up a friendship and, later, a romance.

"He was really kind, really sweet," Angela Poole said. "He captured my heart."

They married in 2010 and not long after relocated from California to Olympia — which they chose because the rainy weather reminds Jason Poole of his native England. They enjoy watching movies together and walking their dogs.

During the day, Poole takes Dial-a-Lift to the gym and to South Puget Sound Community College. Though he once dreamed of being a teacher, he's not working toward a degree. Rather, he's keeping his mind active and engaged, which is vital for those with TBI. He's taken the same math class with the same teacher three times and works on reading with a tutor.

"I think I'll be learning until the day I die," he said. "It's hard. It's actually really hard just trying to think."

He does best with a routine, which helps him remember the details of

day-to-day living despite damage to his short-term memory.

"I always have a schedule on the blackboard, so he knows what his schedule is," Angela Poole said. "Everything is visual in our house."



Jason Poole after his injury in Iraq with twin sister
(Photo courtesy of Jason Poole)

He often struggles to express himself — as if the English he's spoken his whole life were a second language — yet he's done a lot of public speaking about life with a brain injury, inspiring others with such injuries and helping medical professionals understand what survivors experience. In that way, he has become a teacher.

And though he is, he said, "a new Jason," he is warm and engaging and has many friends — just as he did before June 30, 2004, a day he celebrates each year as "alive day."

"Life's too short, man," he said. "I almost died, but I'm not dead, so I should try and do as much as I can with the life I've got."

Going the Distance airs on Ch. 28 on Tuesday, March 26th at 10 p.m

For more information:
www.goingthedistance.info



David L. Brown filming Jason Poole and Kristen Collins for "Going the Distance."
(Photo courtesy of David L. Brown Productions)