

Members

Architect Fights for Awareness and Funding for Brain Injury

by John Simpson

Some are born to advocacy; others have it thrust upon them. Dennis Benigno, AIA, falls into the latter camp.

In 1984, while preparing to obtain his architectural license, Benigno experienced every parent's nightmare when his son was severely injured in an automobile accident. A pedestrian, his son "D.J.," then 14, incurred head injuries that left him severely brain damaged.

Needless to say, Benigno's budding architectural career was put on hold as he and his family struggled to care for their son, who has lived at home with them since the accident. Years of rehabilitative treatment, however, left D.J. still unable to walk or talk and confined to a wheelchair.

"There's a time when you realize therapy can only go so far, and that the only thing that is going to help is to find a cure," Benigno says.

Coalition for Brain Injury Research

With that in mind, Benigno founded the Coalition for Brain Injury Research, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to supporting research to find a cure for brain injury.

"Recent research has shown that the brain *can* heal," Benigno comments.

Currently the focus of that research has been on nerve regeneration to repair damaged brain cells. Neural growth drugs and neural transplantation offer brain injury victims the "distinct possibility" of a cure, Benigno says. But such cutting-edge research takes money, and raising money requires raising awareness.

The Coalition's first attempt at fundraising was by any measure a rousing success. Kicked off with a press conference at Benigno's Clifton, N.J., home attended by Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.),

among others, a three-mile walkathon held at Ringwood (N.J.) State Park subsequently generated \$55,000.

With any eye toward increasing the event's publicity, Benigno says the walkathon will be held in New York City this year, in late October.

Hope for a cure

In the interim, Benigno will carry on his lobbying efforts in support of federal funding for research on stem cells, the

jury has a higher rate of occurrence than many other major medical disorders, including AIDS and breast and prostate cancer, it receives comparably less attention. That's partly because many of the victims of severe brain injury die soon after their trauma and partly because, until recent advances in stem cell research, there was little hope for significant improvement in the condition of those afflicted with what Benigno calls this "silent epidemic."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARCHITECT

Participants line up to register for the "Cure for Brain Injury Walkathon."

primordial cells from which all human tissue and organs develop. Considered the most promising area for investigation into the regeneration of damaged organs, including brain tissue, stem cell research received a boost in 1999 when the Clinton administration authorized federal funding for research on cells culled from human embryos. But the decision has drawn opposition from groups citing ethical considerations.

"It's been a real battle," Benigno says of ongoing efforts to find a cure for brain injury. But he might as easily be talking about the financial and emotional toil he and his family face caring for their son, or of the struggle to raise public awareness of brain injury in a world of competing causes.

Benigno notes that, although brain in-

Architecture has "given me my life back"

His son's accident also took its toll on Benigno's career.

"I stopped everything for four or five years to focus on my son," he says. Finally, in 1994, a full decade after his son's accident, Benigno obtained the necessary credits and license to practice in New Jersey, where he now works as a facility manager.

"It's given me my life back," he says.

For more information on the Coalition for Brain Injury Research, a nonprofit organization, or to make a charitable contribution, contact Dennis Benigno at (973) 478-3913 or 270 Hazel Street, Clifton, NJ 07011. All proceeds go to fund research to find a cure for brain injury. ■