

INSPIRE ATLANTA

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COVER STORY HELPING OTHERS



Ryan Teal of Canton (with wife Anna) suffered a stroke in 2018 that left him with aphasia. Ryan and Anna Teal have developed adult readers to help people with the disorder, which can make communicating difficult. PHOTOS BY PHIL SKINNER FOR THE AJC

Canton man, wife aid others battling aphasia

Their readers help people with the disorder communicate better.

By Nancy Badertscher
For the AJC

In the days after Bruce Willis' family announced that the star was leaving acting, Google searches for his medical condition skyrocketed.

Willis has aphasia, a relatively common but generally unknown language disorder, his family disclosed in late March.

The disorder, which caused Willis to depart Hollywood and a decades-long and successful acting career, also upended the lives of Anna and Ryan Teal of Canton.

Aphasia is usually the result of a brain injury, often a stroke. The disorder doesn't alter a person's intelligence but can make communicating difficult, if not impossible.

June is National Aphasia Awareness Month, a designation meant to draw public attention to this isolating disorder that experts say affects 25% to 40% of stroke victims. At the Teals' home in Canton, every day is Aphasia Awareness Day and a new opportunity to make life better for Ryan and others with the disorder.

"Not that I would wish this condition and these circumstances on anyone, but, of all people, Ryan is not deserving of going through such a hard time," Anna said. "He is the strongest, kindest, most loving person I've ever met."

Ryan and Anna met while attending Kennesaw State University and married in October of 2012. Six years later, Ryan, 34, was in his 10th year working as a government intelligence analyst, and Anna, 33, was starting a promising new job in marketing.

"We were just sort of gallivanting through life like most people in their 30s," Anna said.

On Feb. 6, 2018, that all changed. Ryan had a massive stroke after the couple went to bed for the night.

"Thank God he fell out of bed because I don't think I would have woken up," Anna said. "I rushed to his side. I could see something was wrong."

Ryan could not stand up or speak. He had weakness on his right side.

Ryan and Anna spent months at Kennesaw State Hospital, Atlanta's Shepherd

MORE DETAILS

About aphasia

The National Aphasia Association says the communication disorder affects about 2 million Americans and is more common than Parkinson's disease, muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy. About 180,000 people in the U.S. acquire the disorder each year.

On the potential for patients to improve: "I don't know that we have ever seen someone with aphasia who could not make progress when given the tools and access to professional therapy..." says Carol Persad, Ph.D., neuropsychologist, and director of the University Center for Language and Literacy in Michigan.



Ryan Teal uses a reader with the help of his wife Anna.

About the Teals' Aphasia Readers:

Level 1 (published in 2021). Level 2 out this month. Level 3 is scheduled for release in early 2023. Each book costs \$34.99 with a portion of the proceeds going to aphasia awareness and helping others pay for intensive speech therapy. The Level 1 book is on sale through June 30 for \$29.99. Learn more: aphasiareaders.com

Center, its partner program Shepherd Pathway, and the Aphasia program at the University of Michigan. That was followed by a year of doing teletherapy with the staff in Michigan.

"Ryan came to us with strengths in

writing and using technology, and we built on that," said Carol Persad, Ph.D., director of the University Center for Language and Literacy, the home of the University of Michigan's Aphasia Program. "He also was a great model for others in that he was so open to using new and different ways to communicate."

In their journey, the Teals recognized that most practice guides for people with aphasia are written as children's books. That got the wheels turning in Anna to develop Aphasia Readers, which are geared more to adults, those most likely to have the disorder.

Staff at the Aphasia Program at the University of Michigan gave feedback and some guidance from a clinical perspective on the books' development. But Persad said the books are all the work of Ryan and Anna.

"This is just the start of what we hope to see in the aphasia community — more resources that are well-targeted and that are also relevant to people with aphasia," she said.

The first of the "Aphasia Readers" came out last November. Another will be available this month, and a third is scheduled for release in 2023. Some of the proceeds from the book sales are going to benefit aphasia research, said Anna, who quit her job back in 2018 to help Ryan and now has her own marketing business that's local to Canton.

Ryan's communications skills have improved quite a bit and have surpassed his doctor's expectations, Anna said.

He communicates primarily with a single word, but he also has functional phrases that he uses every day, such as "Tie my shoe, please." He air writes, spelling out words with his finger in the air, a very common technique used by those with aphasia. And lastly, he uses technology, mostly his phone, to text, and listens to others through his speech-to-text app.

He is still in speech therapy and continues to improve, Anna said.

"It's been an incredible journey to go from a tragic circumstance at a young age when we were totally unprepared to where we are now," she said. "God has put so many wonderful people in our path to help make a difference."

THE UPLIFT



The average number of young eels caught per day rose from 17 in 2008 to 504 in 2020.

LELA NARGI/THE WASHINGTON POST

Giving endangered American eels a hand

On a misty-gray afternoon in May, four people waded into the Hudson River. They have come to check a large fyke net that catches small creatures. It looks like an open tent with a big tunnel attached to one end.

It is migration season for American eels (*Anguilla rostrata*). This net, and 13 others up and down the 315-mile river, are snaring young "glass" eels so that Sarah Mount and college and high school volunteers can count them. "Our goal is not to catch every single eel," says Mount, the coordinator of the Hudson River Eel Project, which is run by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. "It's to count populations over time."

Counting eels has helped scientists learn that American eel populations are increasing. The Hudson River nets caught an average of 17 eels a day in 2008. In 2020, they caught an average of 504. This is great news for these mysterious nocturnal animals, which are listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, partly because of habitat loss and the effects of pollution.

Mount hopes her work with the eel counters will help scientists solve many of the eel mysteries, such as their migration routes, and about how to keep the species from disappearing.

— WASHINGTON POST

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History

Since 2011, CareerRise has given grants to local non-profit organizations that focus on economic mobility, racial equity and workforce development. CareerRise applies its unique approach by strengthening the regional workforce ecosystem and bridging the gap between employer job needs and employment opportunities for career growth.

Did you know

Since its inception, CareerRise has provided more than \$10 million in grants to more than 25 organizations throughout the region. CareerRise engages with employers to understand their specific employment opportunities and needs. Grants provide organizations with the capacity to offer training and apprenticeship opportunities.

Motto

Skilled employees, good jobs, strong communities.

How you can help

Volunteers can coach or mentor employees in training on topics such as job etiquette, interviewing skills and resume writing. Reach out to CareerRise if your organization offers apprenticeships or employment opportunities. Financial donations are always welcome and are pooled together to provide grants.

To learn more

Visit careerriseatlanta.org or email atlantacareerise@unit-edwayatlanta.org.

Each week, we shine a spotlight on a local nonprofit that needs your help to make metro Atlanta a better place to live.

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We recognize a big part of our journalistic mission is to shine a spotlight on wrongdoings and to hold our public officials accountable.

But we also understand the importance of celebrating our region's moments, milestones and people. That's exactly what we hope to accomplish with Inspire Atlanta.

Each week, Inspire Atlanta will profile a person that makes

metro Atlanta a better place in which to live.

Of course, we can't do this alone: We need your help in finding extraordinary people and identifying inspiring stories across our region.

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