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Film Chronicles Recovery of Carlsbad Teen

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Ian McFarland, 15, uses his walker on the street near his home in Carlsbad. With him is his aunt, Melissa Coleman, who has been caretaker to Ian and his two siblings since their parents died in a 2008 car accident. (Charlie Neuman / San Diego Union-Tribune)

Ian McFarland was just 5 years old when he suffered a traumatic brain injury in a 2008 car accident. Ten years later, the Carlsbad middle-schooler is still on the road to recovery.

Ian is one of four TBI survivors profiled in the new documentary “Going the Distance: Journeys of Recovery,” which will make its regional premiere May 19 at the La Paloma Theatre in Encinitas.

Emmy Award-winning Bay Area filmmaker, David L. Brown, started filming “Going the Distance” in 2010 and completed an hour-long rough cut that screened in several brain injury conferences in 2012. But he was unable to raise the completion funding until last summer. At the film’s premiere last November, it was awarded “Most Inspirational Film” at the Oregon Documentary Film Festival.

Ian, the San Elijo Middle School eighth-grader said it’s hard to look back on footage from the time when his mobility and speech were severely limited. In the months following the crash, he couldn’t see, walk, talk or even feed himself.

Today, he is still dealing with some cognitive issues and weakness on his left side, which requires the use of a wheelchair or walker. But he’s active in school, horseback riding, mono-skiing, hiking and rock-climbing, among other hobbies. Helping him with daily tasks is his therapy dog Nutella, a sweet-natured, 6-year-old Lab/retriever mix.

“I try to use what I can,” Ian said about his disabilities. “A TBI is scary, not fun. The hardest part is people watching me do things and asking me questions. I want to be like everyone else.”

Brown said Ian’s slow, but steady progress is emblematic of the hopeful message in “Going the Distance,” which will be screened in a triple-bill with two of his older documentaries about aging surfing pioneers: “Surfing for Life” and “Of Wind and Waves: The Life of Woody Brown.”

“All three films tell inspirational human stories that include courage and determination to surmount life’s challenges with support from loved ones; and the importance of continuing to follow one’s bliss as you age and as you recover from traumatic brain injury,” Brown said. “I have been very inspired by being able to tell their stories.”



Ian McFarland, 15, sits with his therapy dog Nutella at his Carlsbad home. (Charlie Neuman / San Diego Union-Tribune)

On July 3, 2008, Ian and his parents and siblings were riding together to a wedding in Boulder, Colo., when for unknown reasons the family’s Ford Explorer swerved into the median, flipped over and fell off a bridge to a road below.

His parents — 40-year-old Scripps physical therapist Tod McFarland and 38-year-old stay-at-home mom Stephanie McFarland, who had been at the wheel — died at the scene.

Ian's younger siblings, Lauren, then 2, and Luke, 1, had only minor injuries. But Ian suffered brain injuries so severe he spent a month in a coma at a Utah hospital before being transferred to Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego, where he would stay for another three months.

Doctors recommended that the children be allowed to stay in Carlsbad, where they had a network of family and friends. So, Stephanie's sister, Melissa Coleman, quit her teaching job in Tulsa, Okla., and moved to Carlsbad, where she has cared for the children ever since.

"I wanted to keep them in their environment," Coleman, 47, said of her decision. "It was my highest honor. Not for a second have I regretted it."



Phot of Ian McFarland, right, with his parents Stephanie and Tod McFarland. Stephanie is holding their daughter Lauren. (McFarland family)



Portrait of Ian McFarland with his aunt Melissa Coleman at their home in Carlsbad. (Charlie Neuman / San Diego Union-Tribune)

In the years after the accident, Coleman said Ian underwent physical, occupational and cognitive therapy for up to 20 hours a week. When the insurance money for these services ran out, Tod's former colleagues at Scripps Green hospital continued to provide therapy to Ian for free (and some still do today).

"We're so full of gratitude for the people in our little village," Coleman said.

Scenes of these therapy sessions in "Going the Distance" show Ian's positivity and sense of humor, despite the obstacles he faced.

"No matter how high a bar the doctors set, he'd meet it," Coleman said of Ian. "He's my hero. No matter what happens, he just keeps going. He's got a lot of grit."

Brown met Ian in 2009 and started filming him about year later. He is the youngest TBI survivor profiled in the movie, which charts the quartet's progress from accidents to recovery.

Brown said he got the idea for the film in 2008 when he was hired to document a 22-mile paddle-boarding event on Lake Tahoe that raised money for the Bob Woodruff Foundation, named for the ABC newsman who suffered a TBI from a roadside bomb while covering the war in Iraq in 2006.

One of the participants in that paddleboard event was Jay Waller, a TBI survivor who was nearly beaten to death by a stranger while on a vacation in Hawaii. After a long period of struggle and recovery, Waller became a doctor of physical therapy in his native Connecticut.

Waller's journey is featured in the film. So is that of Marine veteran Jason Poole, who stepped on a roadside bomb in Iraq in June 2004 and was severely injured by shrapnel. Today he's a married college student in Olympia, Wash. The fourth subject is Bay area resident Kristen Collins, who was injured when a drunken driver struck the motorcycle she was riding. Today she works as a trauma ward nurse.

Coleman said the filming process with Brown was a lot of fun for the whole family. The highlight was the film's closing scene of Ian surfing at a local beach with surfing dog Ricochet, the Escondido golden retriever who works with special-needs children.





Filmmaker David Brown, right, shoots footage of Ian McFarland at a local beach in 2011 for the documentary “Going the Distance: Journeys of Recovery.” (David L. Brown)

In preparation for the upcoming showing in Encinitas, Coleman and the McFarland children have screened “Going the Distance” several times. Ian said that although it’s hard to watch his early scenes, he knows it’s for a good cause.

Brown said he hopes the film sheds light on what he calls “a hidden epidemic.” A TBI occurs every 15 seconds in America and today, 5.3 million Americans are living with TBI-related disabilities, he said.

“The numbers are startling,” Brown said. “The epidemic is a lot bigger than people realize and it affects a huge number of people ... I knew it was an important story that needed to be told. I hope that our four survivor stories can provide not only inspiration but also an effective model of what a successful recovery from TBI can consist of if the main elements, especially love and support, are present.”

The documentary triple-bill runs from 4 to 9 p.m. Saturday, May 19, at the La Paloma, 471 S. Coast Highway, Encinitas. “Going the Distance” screens at 4 p.m., “Surfing for Life” at 6 p.m. and “Of Wind and Waves” at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$18. Call (760) 436-7469 or lapalomatheatre.com.