



Back row (left to right): Shaquenta Byars, Occupational Therapy Assistant; Jada Risher, client; Gretchen Jackson, Intern; Janet Spires, Nurse Supervisor; Eric Kovak, client. Middle row: Clients John Fowler, Brittany Brooks, Tony Ramey, Ray Oswald. Front row: Clients Jamilah Robert, Levant Goodman.

Surviving and thriving

One by one, the participants of VR's four-week brain injury comprehensive evaluation hold up a small painting they have just completed and describe what it means to them. The painting is a chance for them to express something about their life with brain injury, what they have learned while at VR, and to reflect on their future.

Tony Ramey is a big Clemson fan, as you might guess from looking at his canvas. It is decorated in bold purple and orange lines, with four heart shapes arranged diagonally, almost like paws.

"The purple is like a purple heart," he tells the group. "It's about bravery and what we have overcome." Tony has a severe speech impediment, but no one has trouble understanding him. "The orange is the eye of the tiger. You have to have strength and determination."

"That's not what any of us expected him to say," says Janet Spires, Nurse Supervisor. The art project is the final group activity for these clients. Together, they came up with a

word which is sketched across the canvas boards. When the paintings are properly arranged, the word will be visible.

Eric Kovak holds up a beautiful drawing of a boat pulled up on a sandy shore. A former professional bass fisherman, Eric was hurt in a boating accident. He talks about the journey he's been on since that time and how he's moving forward. "This is the calm after the storm."

John Fowler, an artist who carries a sketchbook with him filled with detailed drawings and watercolors of plants, insects and animals, surprises the staff by creating a very abstract painting. The solid green background represents his life as a manager who was on track for a regional promotion. "After my brain injury, this is what my life feels like," he says, pointing to blobs of many different colors of paint splattered over the green. "It's abstract and chaotic." Then he points to three blue lines. "This is the help you've given me and my hope to get back to where I was."

"Three years ago, my accident happened on a Friday and the doctors gave me a small chance of surviving," Jamilah Robert says, showing the group her painting. "At first I couldn't talk or walk. Now I can." On the canvas, with help from the staff, she has written "I survived and thrived."

For each person, the colors and shapes have meaning, both big and small. After they have shared their stories, Spires arranges the canvas panels in order. The word chosen by the group, which is now visible, is courage.

they may feel and behave differently than before the injury," says Spires.

A brain injury may cause temporary or permanent impairment of cognitive, emotional, metabolic, motor, and/or sensory functions. VR serves individuals with an acquired brain injury (ABI) or a traumatic brain injury (TBI). An ABI is an injury that occurs after birth, but is not due to congenital or degenerative issues. Causes of ABI include hypoxia, illness, infection, stroke, trauma and tumor. TBI occurs when an external force injures



"When they leave here, they have hope," says Spires. "They learn a lot about themselves, they learn about their brain injury, and they learn what they are capable of. Many times a person who comes here has been told, over and over, what they can't do. We focus on their abilities and learn what they can do."

Over four weeks at the Evaluation Center, the clients meet and interact with others who have similar challenges. Most of the staff who work one-on-one with them are certified brain injury specialists.

"We educate the clients about brain injury and help them understand, based on their specific issues, why

the brain, such as from a fall or a concussion. A TBI is also an acquired brain injury.

"This is one of the passions in my life," says Spires.

"This is something that we all love to do. Our mission is to help people become employed, and I want our clients to know that they can work and I want employers to know that as well."

VR's four-week brain injury comprehensive evaluation was developed in cooperation with the Head and Spinal Cord Injury (HSCI) Division of the SC Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Roger C. Peace Rehabilitation Hospital in Greenville and the Brain Injury Association of South Carolina, which continue to contribute to the program.