

https://www.leadertelegram.com/townnews/psychology/brain-in-com-brings-week-of-tbi-advocacy/article_bd68b762-a235-43c7-821c-777d46581ba8.html

FEATURED

Brain In-Com brings week of TBI advocacy

Gabriel Gibbons Leader-Telegram staff
Jun 10, 2026

1 of 2





EAU CLAIRE — For those living with an invisible disability, recognition of its long-term effects from the outside can be difficult.

UW-Eau Claire grad student Maddie Nystel understands the reality of having what's considered an invisible disability. A vehicular accident two years ago left her with a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

"I flew off the handlebars and fractured my skull, had some brain bleeds and ruptured my eardrum. I was airlifted, helicopter ride to the hospital back to the cities, and was in the ICU, was [in] an induced coma for a couple days. When I woke up, I was not cognitively awake," Nystel said. "I was having full conversations with people, but I still have no memory two years later of the accident, or the first week of being in the hospital."

At the time, Nystel was an undergraduate, going to school at St. Cloud State University while studying behavior therapy. The accident left Nystel with uncertainty, as TBIs can differ greatly from person to person.

"A lot of questions were being flown around about what it was going to look like going forward. No one really had a straight answer, because brain injuries are very fluctuating," Nystel said. "One person's brain injury can look completely different than another person's, and that was really hard for my parents to hear, and also [for] doctors to try and explain too."

She eventually entered into UW-Eau Claire's graduate school to study speech language pathology, and is now a part of the Brain Injury Intensive Comprehensive Treatment Program, or Brain In-Com for short.

UW-Eau Claire's speech, language, and hearing sciences department hosts Brain In-Com alongside the Brain Injury Association of Wisconsin. The program represents a week of care for those with TBIs, as well as a learning experience for UW-Eau Claire graduate students, like Nystel, who look to further their speech therapy studies.

Jerry Hoepner, a professor at the UW-Eau Claire's Communication Sciences and Disorders department, says Brain In-Com started last year and mentions how legislation played a role in treatment and advocacy for TBIs. When TBIs were finally designated as a chronic condition by law in 2025, its recognition changed.

"That was a big game changer for us. That means you should be able to get ongoing treatment, just like someone with diabetes or any other chronic condition would, not just all on the front end, which is how things have been done for the last 40, 50 years," Hoepner said. "You go in for your initial care and then that ends, insurance ends and then you're out of the system and you're on your own, but you're left with a brain injury for the rest of your life. We're looking at how we can help people to navigate that journey."

Hoepner says the group has been working toward advocacy with community engagement, whether it be stickers for local businesses that indicate a brain-injury-friendly establishment, or through social media posts.

The UW-Eau Claire professor says Brain In-Com works closely with UW Eau-Claire's Kinesiology department to promote physical activity, an important aspect of cognitive health. By also working with educators from other universities, Hoepner hopes awareness and further support can spread.

"I think we have the opportunity to serve people who have real needs. At the same time we learn and create things that will help the broader community," Hoepner said. "I'm fortunate that I'm amongst a group of international colleagues who work on and think about this stuff, and we're hoping to kind of create that ripple effect where this happens more broadly."

Nystel still feels the effects of the TBI, dealing with migraines from her accident, as well as some memory issues, and tinnitus. Despite the setbacks that came from her accident, Nystel finished her undergraduate studies on time, and through the experience, found what she wanted to study for graduate school.

"I think that it affected a lot of parts of me, but not my drive for things," Nystel said. "If anything, it's pushed me harder to prove to everyone that I can still do stuff."

Nystel says an important aspect of the discussion surrounding TBIs is recognizing the stigma and public perception of the condition, while acknowledging it's a problem that's far reaching.

"It's not just a little kid in a football game [who] hits his head in a tackle, it's people who are living completely normal lives where it can happen to anyone," Nystel said. "I think having that support and even doing these one week things is very helpful to get the ball rolling that other people feel similar, and are in similar spots."

Gabriel Gibbons

Education reporter