Photo project gives Lexingtonians a new voice

Shaun Grady of Lexington has vision and balance problems from a traumatic brain injury. In order to help make Lexington more accessible, he is working with the SLI Brain Injury Wellness Center in a project called the Photovoice Project and is taking photos of what works and what doesn’t around town to help start a dialogue. He’s taking a photo of one of the curb cuts along Massachusetts Avenue. Wicked Local Staff Photo/Ann Ringwood

By Jordan Frias
jfrias@wickedlocal.com
Posted Oct. 18, 2014 @ 6:00 am
Updated at 12:44 PM

LEXINGTON

With a cane in his left hand and a red digital camera in the right, Shaun Grady takes a picture of uneven cobblestone in Lexington Center.

The 55-year-old Lexington resident is spending parts of his week taking photographs of “environmental barriers” for people walking around town.

“That could be dangerous for anybody walking by. Someone could trip and fall and hit their head, let alone me who is more prone to falling down,” he said.
Grady's balance issues are the result of a brain tumor and the multiple surgeries he underwent six years ago to treat the tumor. "I had to learn how to walk again, I had to learn how to talk again," Grady said. "I've had cognitive problems, executive functioning problems. I have a really horrible sense of time and time passing."

He is a volunteer at the SLI Brain Injury Wellness Center, which is running an eight-week community integration study for people with brain injury led by Research and Education Director Laura Lorenz and funded by the Dana Home Foundation.

The Lexington-based business works to provide long-term residential programs and independent affordable housing. It also works on developing community integration practices with its Brain Injury Research and Wellness Center, which provides physical, cognitive and social fitness programs to people with brain injury.

This project, known as photovoice, started in 1990 and has been conducted all over the world, according to Lorenz. But this is the first time it has been done in Lexington.

"The project is meant to get their perspectives, their views on strengths as well as challenges related to their ability to get around and about in Lexington and to be a part of community life," said Lorenz.

Lorenz is teaching Grady and four other participants how to use a camera "as a research tool" to capture what is and isn’t an everyday obstacle for people who have had a brain injury.

These photos will be accompanied with captions written by the participants that explain what each photo is illustrating.

The next step of the project is to create an exhibit of the work to make the community aware of integration successes and issues.

"We’ll see if we can get some action and have community conversations," she said. "It’s more about working together to figure things out," Lorenz said.

Her participants include Grady and another volunteer at the SLI Brain Injury Wellness Center, a member of the Lexington Commission on Disability, and two residents of the Douglas House.

Tim Coughlin, a resident of the Douglas House – an assisted living facility for brain injury survivors on Oakland Street – is also working with SLI.

Coughlin, like Grady, is an engineer who suffered a brain injury six years ago.

"I was crossing [Route] 2A in Acton and was hit by a truck. Six weeks later, I woke up in Spaulding [Rehabilitation] center," Coughlin said.

The accident left him with memory issues and made him more susceptible to seizures.

Coughlin said his disability is "not physical, more mental," which is different then the other volunteers in the study.

He volunteers at the Lexington Senior Center on Massachusetts Avenue and bags groceries at the Stop & Shop on Bedford Street.

Because of his injury, he isn’t allowed to play hockey competitively, but he occasionally skates with the girls hockey team he coaches and plays golf whenever he can.
"I can't afford to get hit in my head with a helmet on," he said.

Capturing the problems

With this project, Grady and Coughlin are able to reflect on things they are no longer able to do and what limits them in the community.

One picture Grady took was of the swimming pool at Boston Sports Club on Bedford Street. The colligate-swimmer cannot swim like he used to, but said now "the feeling of floating is freeing."

"When I get into the pool, floating and swimming makes me feel most like I used to before I had my injury," he said.

Lorenz said it is important for people with brain injury to find something meaningful to do.

"One problem after a brain injury of any kind, you might end up being isolated at home. Maybe you aren't able to work a job. You might have a change in friends and family, who become distant," she said. "Once you have a brain injury you're not quite the same person you used to be."

Both men are looking forward to starting the broader conversation with people in the community.

"The high school kids I work with [at Stop & Shop] say, 'you were an engineer? Why don't you learn to run the register?,' There's a different level of understanding of the affects of brain injury that kids 14 to 16 have," Coughlin said.

Follow Jordan Frias on Twitter @LexReporter.