

### The coal miner | Ludwig Gutmann, MD

*The following operations of Consolidation Coal will work the afternoon shift: the Arkwright Mine, the Osage Mine, the Humphrey Mine, the Pursglove Mine, the Blacksville Number 2 Mine.*

The message came crackling over the radio in Morgantown. It was broadcast every day, as routine as the notification of school closings after a snowstorm.

Three major disasters defined Gary Gallatin's life: an explosion, a mine accident, and a stroke. I met him for the first time as he lay quietly on the hospital gurney with his head elevated, looking straight ahead. He was 59 years old. The room was still except for his stertorous breathing. His thickset gray hair was tousled, random clumps extending in all directions. His full, squared-off face showed no concern or emotion, almost to the point of seeming indifferent. He quietly watched his wife and daughter, Tammy, as they provided all the information about the last 18 hours while I examined him. The CT scan showed a large area of hypodensity in the pons that told a dire story.

The devastating pontine abnormality was, however, much less remarkable than the large areas of missing brain in his frontal lobes. They had all the appearance of an extensive prefrontal lobotomy—an operation used a half century ago on schizophrenic and combative patients who had been hospitalized in the state mental hospital at nearby Weston. The large plate, visible on the CT scan and replacing the frontal bone, could only mean that there had been major trauma in the past. His old forehead scars and missing left eye gave further evidence of the prior injury.

Gary grew up in a small southwestern Pennsylvania town. He was the oldest of six children; his father was a coal miner, and his mother worked in a shirt factory. His wife said friends described him as a nice guy who spent considerable time helping his mother care for his younger siblings.

The first tragedy happened when Gary was 16. He had just gotten home from school, and, without warning, the coal stove in the living room exploded. Gary was upstairs with his mother and baby sister when the house was engulfed in flames and smoke. He pushed his mother out the window and jumped after her. Before he could stop her, his mother ran back into the house, now flaming like a tinderbox, to try to save her children. Gary watched helplessly as his five brothers and sisters perished in the raging fire and his mother was fatally burned. Gary's fa-

ther, Leland, was working in the Shannopin Mine that afternoon. Of his large family, only Gary and Leland survived.

Gary became withdrawn after the tragedy, but, with time, he put it behind him and, after finishing high school, he married his high school sweetheart, Dorothy. Like his father, he became a coal miner. He was proud to follow in Leland's footsteps.

In the 1960s and 1970s, coal mining was a dominant part of the economic and social structure of West Virginia's Monongalia County and surrounding areas. Coal was king. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mining provided opportunities for desperate non-English-speaking immigrants—Italians, Hungarians, Czechs, and Poles—willing to work for meager wages in unsafe conditions. West Virginia's history is replete with mining disasters and tragedies. Although sophisticated mining machines and strict government safety rules and regulations have replaced the pick and shovel days of yesteryear, accidents continue to occur.

Consol's Blacksville Number 2, a union mine, had just become operational, and Gary and Eugene, Dorothy's brother, began working there in late 1970. Eugene remembered his young brother-in-law as a conscientious and hard worker who was easy-going and accommodating, often working overtime. "He liked to have fun. He was always neat and particular, especially about his car. He always kept it clean."

Dorothy described Gary at 24 as trim and muscular with brown hair, always cut neat and short. "He was good natured and always had a ready smile," Dorothy said. "We were married 4 years before the accident. He enjoyed being a father. The baby was 3 when the accident happened. Tammy—her middle name, Leann, was in memory of one of his sisters who had died in the fire—was a great joy, and Gary spent many long hours helping to care for her. It was a role he had missed since the house had burned so many years ago. He had such great patience with her. He did everything she wanted to make her happy. He was the perfect husband and the perfect father."

When Gary began work in the mine, he hired on as a roof bolter. He knew securing the roof to prevent cave-ins was the most dangerous job in any mine and also one of the best paying. Gary liked the challenge of operating the machine—setting up safety jacks to support the roof, drilling holes into the several layers

of rock strata, and setting four-foot rods into the mine ceiling.

Gary never remembered how it happened when the roof crashed down. His foreman had asked him to work through the lunch hour, to finish bolting up an offset in two roof heights. Suddenly a slab of coal broke free, hitting Gary's helmet and forcing his face into the front of the bolting machine. Eugene found him moments later. Gary was unconscious, blood seeping from his nose and ears, his face and forehead crushed flat. After Gary was rushed to the hospital, Eugene looked over the scene. "There was just a small pile of coal on the floor—about a wheelbarrow load. You never would have guessed that it'd almost killed Gary."

Dorothy told me, "After the surgery—removing his forehead, portions of his badly damaged frontal lobes, and his crushed left eye—his neurosurgeon told me that Gary's left side would be paralyzed and, if he survived, he would probably end up in a vegetative state."

Dorothy, young and idealistic, could not accept this grim prognosis and devoted herself to caring for Gary in the hospital. She helped bathe him, messaging his skin and exercising his arms and legs. It took weeks before he slowly began regaining consciousness. Gary spent the next year in an intensive rehabilitation program and underwent reconstructive cranial and facial surgery.

Dorothy's dark haired, fun-loving, and smiling, handsome husband had been transformed. He was moody and withdrawn, and there were unpredictable outbursts of frustration. Dorothy could not remember his ever being angry or losing his temper, but now it was a regular event. Complicating everything were grand mal seizures, made worse by his refusal to take his medications.

As the years went by, Gary's moodiness and impatience began to dissipate and his ever-ready smile returned. Still, as Dorothy said, "The accident changed everything." Gary's life as a hard-working young coal miner was now behind him. No more long hours in the dark coal pits. Listening to the afternoon shift announcements on the radio—a part of every coal miner's life—was long forgotten. Once Gary recovered, he never tired of spending his days visiting with his long-time friends and hanging out in his hometown of Mt. Morris, a small working community nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians.

For many years, Gary's days had centered on the floral and beauty shop on Main Street that his wife, Dorothy, owned. For several hours every day, he entertained the women who worked there with his jokes and stories. The Senior Center, where he often took lunch, played bingo and checkers, and participated in sing-a-longs, was just around the corner. It was only a short walk to O'Reilly's Pub, a green and white cinderblock building right on the edge of the highway, where he liked playing pool, watching NASCAR races, and eating cheeseburgers and French fries.

To family and neighbors, Gary always seemed laid-back, easy-going, and relaxed. His continuous smile and his droopy eyelid gave him the mischievous look of someone permanently winking at the world. His soft, overweight body gave no hint of the muscular young coal miner of years ago. He was happy when friends took him along on shopping expeditions or to the local pond for fishing. Tammy recalled him, as she was growing up, more as a playmate than a dad. She did not remember him as he had been before the mine roof crashed down.

"He would hold the end of the rope so I could jump, be the back seat rider on our two-seat bike, and pitch the softball to me. I can never remember him being angry with me or disciplining me. In fact, when I got in trouble with Mom, I would run to him to take up for me, and he always did. I could never do anything wrong in his eyes, both as a child and as an adult. He never helped me with my homework or showed me how to drive. What he did teach me, though, was to enjoy what life gives you and not cry about what might have been."

Dorothy, his wife, saw him clearly as a man with no real initiative, no motivation, and no ambition, but she was still devoted to him. Gary took no interest in his personal hygiene and had to be reminded to brush his teeth and shower. He felt no responsibility in doing any of the household chores. He would pay others to mow the grass or wash the car rather than do it himself.

In many ways the transformation in Gary was like that in the well-publicized case of Phineas Gage, the capable and efficient railway foreman who, in 1848, had a tamping iron explode through the frontal portion of his brain. The personality changes in both men were profound but with a difference. Whereas Gary became docile and indifferent, Gage became impatient, irreverent, and grossly profane.

"When I learn how to walk again, first thing I'll do is go fishin' with my dad," he would tell the therapist every day while going through his rehabilitation, "Leland's gonna take me to Canada."

On one of Leland's occasional visits, all Gary wanted to talk about was the trip. "Hey, Dad," Gary said. "I'm walking real good. I should be ready to go fishing in a few weeks. We're still goin' to Canada, right?" His pallid face was red with excitement.

On this visit, Leland's last, he stood, looking down at his work shoes. He was a small man with dark curly hair and a thin, neatly trimmed moustache. Dorothy, sitting quietly in the corner, leaned forward, watching him intently.

"Well, yea," Leland said, still looking down. "I am goin' to Canada this summer but I'm gonna be there to fish, not baby-sit."

Gary smiled, nodding his head. Leland's words were lost on him. He was only glad Leland had come to see him.

Not Dorothy, who was instantly furious. She suddenly came out of her chair, her face beet red. "You get out of here, right now," she yelled at him, push-

ing Leland toward the open doorway behind him, “and don’t you ever come back. If Gary wants to fish in Canada, I’ll take him.”

Years later, when Tammy was a teenager, she drove Gary to the cemetery to put flowers on the family graves. Dorothy had picked them out carefully—a large colorful wreath for Gary’s mom and small bouquets for each of the children—and Tammy helped him carry them.

Going to the cemetery memorialized the first great tragedy in Gary’s life—a disaster that he never would talk about, but one Dorothy knew he remembered on some level. “Are you going to be all right?” Dorothy asked every year, but Gary would just give a long sigh with no other real sign of any emotion.

This Memorial Day, two decades after the fire, a man came toward Gary and Tammy on the path. Gary recognized him.

“How you doin’?”

“OK,” the man answered.

“Everything all right?”

The man nodded and walked on.

“Who was that?” Tammy asked. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“Oh,” Gary answered blandly, “that was my dad.” Gary kept on walking.

It was the last time Gary saw Leland and the first time Tammy had seen her grandfather. “I think he missed having a relationship with his dad,” Tammy said, describing the incident to me. “I think he was an embarrassment to Leland.”

The day after I first met Gary in the hospital, he quietly slipped into a coma. Dorothy sat quietly at his bedside, holding his immobile hand in a gentle embrace. Tammy stood in the corner, off to one side, watching intently.

“He’s had such a hard life,” Dorothy said, her voice barely audible. “It doesn’t seem fair.”

“It’s been hard and unfair for both of you,” I said. “You lived the last 30 years with a man you didn’t marry—a man completely changed by a terrible accident. A lot of people wouldn’t have done it. Many people wouldn’t have stayed.”

She smiled as tears slowly streamed down her cheeks. She gently squeezed Gary’s hand. A lifetime of memories seemed to be passing before her eyes. She’d married the man of her dreams, only to have it all come crashing down on her.

At first, she was his nurse, and then she became the sole support of their little family. She worked as a medical transcriptionist and managed her own flower and beauty shop, and she was a homeroom mom, Brownie leader, and a chaperone on school field trips. All the while she took care of Gary.

“I was committed to him. It was the right thing to do,” Dorothy said through her tears.

Tammy’s response was different. “People ask me if I regret not knowing my dad before the mining accident. I’ve never known how to answer that. The truth is that you can’t miss someone you never knew. He was a simple man but, at the same time, an extraordinary one who knew how to make the most out of what life dishes out. That’s what he taught me, to enjoy what life can give you and not cry about what might have been.”

*Following each mining accident in West Virginia, there is always governmental and public scrutiny of the safety regulations that affect coal miners. Gary’s accident resulted in several new regulations including requiring a steel canopy to cover the bolting machine and two men working on the machine at any one time.*

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