Anna and Derrick Gaines on a date night. After Derrick suffered a traumatic brain injury, the two have rebuilt their relationship around a new and deeper investment in one another.
Anna Gaines (MD ’08) last spoke to the man she married on the morning of June 9, 1999. Readying for the office, her husband, Derrick Gaines, donned a cream-colored suit, a bright blue shirt, and a blue tie.

“You look handsome,” Anna said.

Derrick picked her up, gave her a hug, and kissed her. They were both 24 and had been married for not even two years. In college, they’d been racquetball partners at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and then friends, before falling in love—their partnership secured deeply within their admiration for one another.

That morning, they spoke via cell phone as Anna tailed Derrick’s Camry to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. She could see him talking to her through the rear window of his car. They’d been discussing their future. Anna—who’d graduated Phi Beta Kappa from UNC in three years—planned to apply to medical school. Derrick—who’d distinguished himself as one of a couple hundred high school students selected for the accelerated North Carolina School of Science and Math and had been offered several academic scholarships—planned to apply to medical school. Derrick—who’d distinguished himself as one of a couple hundred high school students selected for the accelerated North Carolina School of Science and Math and had been offered several academic scholarships—hoped to get his doctorate in physical therapy. They both wanted children.

“I have a lunch meeting at noon, but I should be back in the office at one,” Derrick said and hung up.

The memory of those last moments within the shared vision of their past and future as a couple is precious to Anna. Now, she alone carries their history, their vision. Derrick cannot remember any of it. Nor can he remember the truck tire that hurtled through his windshield as he was returning from his lunch meeting, or the subsequent six months he...
spent in hospitals and rehabilitation facilities recovering from the severe traumatic brain injuries (TBI) he suffered during the resulting crash. He cannot remember their racquetball games, the letters he wrote Anna every day when they spent a year apart, their wedding, their married life before the accident, or even their experiences together during the 11 years since.

The truck tire struck Derrick in the head and chest and knocked him unconscious before peeling off the roof of the Camry. The car spun across the median and collided, head on, with another vehicle. Derrick’s heart stopped. His brain began to suffocate.

He was flown by emergency helicopter to Allegheny General Hospital. When Anna arrived, he was strapped to a gurney, covered in blood, and comatose.

“She said,” she said to the doctors, “do everything you can. He is such a special man.”

Derrick had suffered diffuse axonal injury, the shearing and tearing of delicate conducting filaments that transmit signals from neuron to neuron; multiple focal contusions, bleeding into brain tissue; and anoxia, cell death from lack of oxygen. The impact also broke his right scapula, right leg, and several ribs and shattered his left hand. Over the next few days, the swelling and bleeding in his brain destroyed yet more tissue. Anna and Derrick’s parents stood at his bedside and prayed for his life.

Three weeks after the accident, Derrick’s eyes flickered open for the first time.

Four weeks after the accident, Anna realized Derrick didn’t know who he was.

Eleven years later, there is little evidence of the trauma to Derrick’s body—a V-shaped scar on the right side of his head, a few others elsewhere. His physical person is almost fully functional. But there is also little evidence of the man Derrick Gaines was before the accident. His neurons are wired differently; his brain functions differently. Derrick and Anna have reconstructed his person.

In the six months immediately following the accident, Derrick spent 12 hours a day with Anna and various teams of rehabilitation specialists relearning how to swallow, walk, speak, eat, groom, go to the bathroom, read, and use ordinary objects. He progressed in minute steps. Derrick’s procedural memory remained intact. He could learn—memorize—by repeating tasks over and over until they became reflexive. Instead of hitting “save,” committing information to his hard drive, he had to wear a groove into a record.

As he healed, Anna waited for her Derrick to recognize her. He recovered core autobiographical information: He had a brother; he was from North Carolina; he was born on July 30, 1974. Later, he seemed to know the faces of his mother, his father, his brother, and his college roommate. Though he couldn’t remember their names or their shared experiences, he retained these deep emotional connections.

But Anna remained anonymous to him, a nameless woman with whom he had to be reacquainted each day—until he began to understand, vaguely, that she was his primary caregiver.

“Hey, girl,” he’d call to her. “What’s your name?”

Then he began to call everyone “Anna”: his mother, his therapists, his brother. Everyone except Anna.

She gave up waiting for him to remember her and began waiting for him to accept the stories
OPPOSITE PAGE AND ABOVE: Derrick and Anna at home with their three children: Justin, 7, Mariah, 5, and Sean, 3. Parenthood has brought more chaos and love into the couple’s lives. “The kids are such a blessing,” says Derrick. RIGHT: Anna at work in UPMC’s Rehabilitation Institute based at UPMC Mercy where she often sees patients who’ve suffered traumatic brain injuries. Anna notes, “I know the current-day ‘snapshot’ of my life with Derrick is nothing like the typical outcome of severe TBI in a young adult. Our success has been very hard fought, and the road continues to be very fulfilling, albeit anything but smooth.”
Anna has learned that rehabilitation requires faith, hope, and the ability to understand that one's beloved may not return.