

‘Finding that joy in their life again’: Student org helps traumatic brain injury patient

By Katie Cassidy, Staff Writer

For people who experience traumatic brain injuries, their lives are dramatically and permanently impacted. Pitt Synapse aims to support these individuals as much as possible as they begin their TBI recovery journeys.

Pitt Synapse is the University’s chapter of Synapse National, a national nonprofit organization that focuses on raising public awareness about TBIs and providing resources for people dealing with TBIs. The organization hopes to eliminate the stigma surrounding TBIs by providing educational resources to the general public and increasing their knowledge on the depth and complexity of the injuries. Synapse National has chapters at 18 universities around the United States, each founded by undergraduate students at those schools.

Abigail Skeel, a junior history of art and architecture major, said Synapse National was still relatively small in 2019 and only had chapters at MIT and Stanford. Skeel said students wanted to start a group at Pitt in order to contribute to Synapse National’s goal of removing stigma around TBIs.

Nishant Agrawal founded Pitt’s chapter of Synapse National in 2019. Skeel said she and Agrawal started by working with patients at UPMC Children’s Hospital in Lawrenceville and mentoring TBI students in the BrainSTEPS program.

“The whole idea of Synapse is to reduce the stigma of traumatic brain injuries and to offer programs to people in the community who have undergone TBIs, such as support groups and buddy programs,” Skeel said. “At Pitt, we are glad to be a part of the larger organization.”

Skeel took over as the organization’s president when Agrawal graduated last December and is now in charge of all operations, such as the buddy program and guest speaker events. She said her main goal now is seeing the group grow so members and the community alike can learn more about TBIs.

“We have a program at the Children’s Hospital where our students can go and visit children in both the trauma units and the neurological surgery and neurology units and offer support through mentoring and tutoring,” Skeel said. “Our work with BrainSTEPS is more of a one-on-one partnership between students and kids. We also offer a lot of speaker events for members to educate themselves.”

Pitt Synapse has six members on its executive board and about 30 members total. Vaish Bandari, a senior neuroscience major, serves as the organization’s vice president of general operation for the 2020-21 academic year. Bandari said she got involved her junior year with Synapse, and that the opportunities and her personal connection to TBIs drew her to the club.



Image courtesy of Abigail Skeel

Abigail Skeel is a junior history of art and architecture major.

"I was a neuroscience major and someone who actually works in a research lab studying TBIs, trying to mitigate the effects of TBIs, so I thought it would be really cool to be a part of it," Bandari said. "The club was just starting out, but it had a lot of interesting opportunities."

As VP of general operations, Bandari runs the buddy program, where club members can match with patients recovering from TBIs in the UPMC Children's Hospital. Bandari said the program helps members get more comfortable discussing TBIs and interacting with people with TBIs. She said her favorite part of the club is helping people learn about TBIs and working to reduce the stigma.

"I think a lot of people just don't really understand TBIs. It is such a general term, but each one is unique," Bandari said. "I think being a part of the club has opened my eyes to that, and helping other people become more aware of that is a really cool thing."

Elisha Sidhu, a sophomore english writing and communications major, joined Synapse at the start of the fall term and became the organization's director of technology and marketing. Sidhu is in charge of creating graphics and running the club's social media account. She said it is "one of the most meaningful experiences" she has been a part of, even though she is not pre-health or involved with any STEM field.

"Pitt Synapse is so unique compared to other pre-health clubs at Pitt. I was so drawn to it because of my understanding of how isolating it can be going through TBIs. People can't see the injury itself and might have a hard time empathizing with it," Sidhu said. "It is a big goal of mine to get this club out there, creating social media posts, creating graphics that educate about TBIs."

The pandemic halted Synapse's in-person mentoring at Children's Hospital. Skeel said their virtual programs, on the other hand, have been amping up and actually make it easier to reach the patients. She said she can see the kids making improvements, even if it is over Zoom, and recalls one boy in particular.

"He was actually one of our first children who joined the program," Skeel said. "He loves drawing, loves painting, and every time he goes on his Zoom call, that is one of the first things he asks to do. We'll have little software programs where he can draw virtually and you can just see his eyes light up. That is a great moment to see."

Skeel said she hopes to be involved with Synapse for as long as possible because she believes in the club's purpose and wants to continue helping as many recovering TBI patients as she can. She said Pitt Synapse is based on longevity and aims to be a constant touchpoint for patients as they begin difficult TBI recovery journeys.

"All of a sudden they are brought into this entire new world where they have to learn to cope and to be able to recover. It is a long haul, unfortunately, but we try to help them through that journey," Skeel said. "The thing I enjoy the most is being able to see their confidence grow. Seeing them become more outgoing, finding that joy in their life again."

This article has been updated to reflect who founded Pitt Synapse.