

Good afternoon. My name is Joseph Briseno, and I am here on behalf of my son, Joseph Briseno, Jr, (we call him Jay). Three years ago, Jay was a 20-year-old Army Reservist who was called up to active duty. He was happy to serve his country in the Iraq War, and worked, along with the rest of his Civil Affairs unit in Baghdad. His job entailed to rebuild Iraq after the war, delivering food, and goods to the Iraqi citizens. Until late June of 2003, when Jay's life was changed by a single bullet to the back of his neck. An Iraqi bystander shot my son, and that single bullet severed Jay's spinal cord. As a result, Jay suffered two cardiac arrests, which cut off his oxygen supply for several minutes, and because of this, he sustained an unknown amount of Anoxic Brain Injury. We were told that Jay would die – that it would be BEST for all of us if he were to die. That it would be impossible for Jay to live with his injuries.

It is now almost 3 years later, and Jay is very much alive. He is STILL, to date, considered by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs to be the most critically injured soldier to have survived the war in Iraq.

And the Briseno family has taken the word "Impossible" out of our vocabulary.

Jay still has a long way to go to make a full recovery, but he has also progressed more than doctors ever thought possible since he was injured. Jay remains a C-3 quadriplegic who is paralyzed from his chin down. He cannot eat, move, speak, or breathe on his own. Although Jay is conscious, his ability to communicate is severely limited – he can only blink, smile or grimace in response to voices and other noises. Since Jay's return home in December of 2003, Jay's mother, two sisters, and I have transformed our basement into an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for Jay. This is where we have spent our days, nights, holidays, birthdays for the past three years, watching over Jay's breathing, vital signs, and the multitude of tubes, wires and monitors that labor to keep our son alive. Jay requires 24-hour-a-day nursing care, and his mother, sisters, and I sleep, eat, and live at his bedside, caring for him around the clock. He must be hooked up to a machine that helps us lift and turn him 12 times a day, every day, so that he won't have pressure sores. A slight shift in the temperature in the house, something as small as a bug or some dust, or a loose wire on his tubing, are more than dangerous for Jay – they hold the power of life or death. Neither my wife, nor I, has slept for more than 3 hours at a time in the past 3 years. My daughters have given up their outside activities, and like my wife and me, they devote themselves to spending hours and days and months on end at Jay's bedside, talking with him, reading to him, or just being near him. We have hired nurses to help us care for our son, but with the widespread nursing shortage in our country, it is not unusual that we must go without a nurse for Jay – caring for him by ourselves. At times, I have quit my job to care for Jay full-time, my wife has quit her job to care for Jay other times, and there have been long periods of time during which neither of us has been able to work, because Jay needed us. Retirement is no longer an option at any age. Family vacations are out of the question. Even a trip to the grocery store for one of us requires a careful coordination of my family's schedules.

And we have not a single regret. We are only thankful, that our Jay is with us, that he is alive and living and with us, in our home, every moment of every day. And little by little, step by step, Jay has regained abilities we were told would be "impossible," given the extent of his injuries. Jay does not believe "impossible" – and neither do we.

Jay was in a coma when we arrived at the German hospital that he'd been taken to after he was shot. The doctors told us to start planning his service – that it would be impossible for him to live with his injuries. They told us he'd never regain consciousness – but then Jay let us know

differently. When his sister started talking to him about their birds had died, Jay began to cry – though he was STILL IN A COMA! He came out of the coma immediately afterwards. Still, the doctors told us, “It is impossible for Jay to live with such severe injuries” – but he HAS. They said, “It is impossible for Jay to be able to swallow again” – but after working with the wonderful therapists at the Tampa, Florida Veterans Affairs hospital, he passed the swallow test. Now a day is not complete if Jay doesn’t eat his Mom’s cooking, or his Godiva ice cream. We know that he will one day be able to eat completely on his own, because NOTHING is impossible.

Some doctors told us that we MUST put Jay in an institution, but we said, “He is our son, and he is coming home with us.” These doctors said, “It will be impossible for him to live at home,” but that was more than two years ago, and Jay has done more than just live at home – he has and continues to THRIVE.

In the beginning, it took a while for Jay to begin to communicate because of his traumatic brain injury. He learned, over months, with the help of his wonderful, devoted therapists, to smile, giggle, and even to grimace to show us what he likes and doesn’t like. He makes it clear which singers MUST GO from the American Idol competition. He even laughs at my corny jokes.

It was one baby step at a time until he got the point of where he is now. Even his doctors couldn’t believe what they were seeing – they have no explanation for the way he has been able to regain some of his abilities. But our family knows that there is no such thing as impossible.

Recently, when Jay had an infection on his foot – which is paralyzed and without any sensation – he flinched and KICKED out when he received a shot in that foot. Does that sound IMPOSSIBLE to you?

The word “Impossible” is no longer a part of the Brisenos’ vocabulary. We have another “I” word – it’s called “IMAGINABLE.” As I stand here in front of you – our many scientists, researchers, doctors, and others dedicated to finding a cure for spinal cord injuries – I feel a kinship. I know that YOU all will not, and HAVE NOT, accepted the “Impossible” for an answer, either. YOU are our hope of overcoming some of the most devastating injuries suffered in this county – spinal cord injuries. But you do not consider the challenge to overcome Spinal Cord Injuries to be “IMPOSSIBLE.” You can imagine and you believe and you know, that in the future, spinal cord injuries will be a thing of the past!

Think for a moment of the great scientists, doctors, and researchers in history, and of how many of these men and women were told their research goals were IMPOSSIBLE. That a vaccine for polio, or a treatment for diabetes, or the miracle of PENICILLIN, would never happen. Yet, here we are, more than 100 years later, and these treatments are not only possible – they’re the norm. And HOW did the researchers and scientists from decades, centuries ago, discover these medical miracles of their time? They DIDN’T have the word “Impossible” in their vocabularies. They didn’t give up. And they had faith that such vaccines, medications, and treatments were all IMAGINABLE.

Jay is counting on me, and on his mother, to take care of him, to be his voice. Jay, our son, is our hero. A true American hero. You do not have to take a bullet in the spine to be a hero. You do not have to go to Iraq and fight for our country’s freedom. You do not have to serve in the Army. You do not have to be Superman. Christopher Reeve knew that. And he knew that YOU, the doctors, the researchers, the scientists, are our hope, our faith, and our steadiest advocates. You go beyond the call of duty. You go on in spite of the dead-ends and legislative barricades,

hour after hour, day after day, and year after year. You are perseverance personified. You are more than our hope for the future – more than a group of nameless scientists who devote your lives to giving US and our loved ones a greater quality of life.

You are our HEROES.

Until the day my son, Jay, can stand up here and speak for himself, I thank you and I salute you, our true American heroes.

I ask one small favor, if I may, and that is for you to think of Jay, and remember that NOTHING is impossible. When this event is over, and it is weeks, months, years down the road, I ask that you think of Jay. When you hit that dead-end, when you feel like the break-through will never come – think of Jay. He is counting on you. And he is here to remind you that nothing is impossible, and everything is imaginable.

Joseph Briseno