

She asked Google for story about coast guard stroke survivor and found her soulmate

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Stroke survivors Tara MacInnes and Sean Bretz. Photo: Tara MacInnes

Tara MacInnes sat at her dining room table, flipped open her laptop and

asked Google for help.

More than a decade after the diagnosis that ruined her chances of becoming a Coast Guard rescue swimmer, she learned that she couldn't even apply for a position she wanted at a VA hospital.

All her old feelings of regret and disappointment were percolating again. Now a mental health counselor, she gave herself advice: Find a distraction.

She wanted a sad story with a happy ending. She typed "Coast Guard" "[cancer survivor](#)."

Too many options. So she typed "Coast Guard" "[brain surgery](#)." Again, variety overload.

She tweaked her search to "Coast Guard" "stroke survivor."

This generated stories and videos about the same guy, Sean Bretz.

Tara spent the next half-hour reading and watching. She found him on Facebook, sent a friend request and went to sleep.

To fully appreciate what happened next, it's best to know everything that led to it.

A few years into his career with the Coast Guard, Sean was part of an Aids to Navigation Team in Jacksonville, Florida. He got a promotion in 2011 and went out to celebrate with friends.

He awoke the next day with more than a hangover. The worst headache of his life left him hardly able to move. The next day, he collapsed in the kitchen of a friend's apartment.

An aneurysm the size of a golf ball located near the base of his brain had burst.

Surgeons implanted a stent so blood flow would bypass the damage. They also put Sean into a coma to reduce swelling.

Six months later, he went home, still relearning how to walk and talk.

In two months, he went from a wheelchair to a walker. Five months after that, he was driving. Two months later, he enrolled in school to become a physical therapist assistant.

Upon graduating, Sean was hired at a facility in Savannah, Georgia, where he stayed briefly during his recovery. His therapist is now his boss.

"I absolutely love walking into a patient's room and sharing the story of me being in this person's exact position – with tubes coming out of everywhere – and showing them that I bounced back and recovered," he said.

Before work one morning, Sean saw Tara's friend request. He accepted.

Tara grew up in California pursuing her path to the Coast Guard rescue role.

By 16, she was on her high school's varsity swim team and varsity water polo team.

She'd also been dealing with recurring migraines since preschool.

An extreme episode just before her junior year of high school prompted an MRI. It showed that she'd suffered two sizeable strokes, one on each

side of her brain, probably at age 5 or younger.

Eight months later, doctors found the cause: moyamoya disease, a disorder caused by blocked collateral arteries near the base of the brain. In 2004, she underwent an eight-hour operation to bypass the stroke damage on the right side of her brain, and a week later another operation on the left side.

Now that Tara's physical problem was gone, so was her hope of becoming a rescue swimmer.

While seeking a new path, she spent time with patients and families at the Stanford Moyamoya Center, where she'd been treated.

Folks came a long way for the center's expertise. Luckily for Tara, her family lived a half-hour away. She and her mom became regulars in the surgery waiting room, sitting through roughly 40 operations with folks who didn't have hands to hold or shoulders to cry on.

A few years later, her dad suggested she become a counselor. He added, "That's what you've been doing all along with those moyamoya patients."

Tara was beginning her counseling career in San Antonio when she reached out to Sean. After he accepted her friend request on Facebook, they began corresponding. Soon they spoke on the phone. Then he flew to San Antonio.

Several get-togethers later, they met at Tara's parents' house in San Jose for the annual reunion at the Stanford Moyamoya Center. With her family gathered for a cookout, Sean proposed.

Picking a wedding date was simple. It had to be the first Saturday in American Stroke Month. And so, last Saturday, they walked down the

aisle.

Before the ceremony, Tara and Sean exchanged vows privately. Not wanting to see each other yet, they spoke from opposite sides of a large oak tree.

Sean walked down the aisle in full Coast Guard uniform. It was the first time Tara saw him in it. She wore a champagne-colored dress with white lace.

The pastor finished by introducing them as Mr. and Mrs. MacInnes.

Not Bretz, his last name. He's taken hers.

Realizing her family name would end otherwise as she was an only child, the fix-it guy came up with this solution.

Their honeymoon involves moving Tara to Savannah. Once they get settled in, she looks forward to sharing the exponential power of their stroke story, their individual tales multiplied by the quirky start to their courtship and, ultimately, their marriage.

"We just want to be there for others," she said.

Sean is eager do that, too. Eventually. For now, his priorities are "relaxing and enjoying each other's company."

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