MHA volunteer Jim Dukes was working as a private explosive ordinance disposal contractor and a radiological emergency response team member when he sustained multiple traumatic brain injuries, the last of which left him having to re-learn how to walk, read, write, and talk. He was also left without vision in one eye or hearing in one ear. So, when an engineer can no longer function as an engineer, what is he to do? That was what Jim’s therapist wanted to know. “What are you going to do with your life?” she asked him. Jim was faced with the choice of being a “man with a disability or a disabled man.” Jim says, “The analytical side of my brain stopped working correctly, but the creative side started to blossom.” That’s when he started taking photos with his cell phone, which he says allowed him to start seeing the beauty in the world. Though he still experiences symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and social anxiety as a result of his injuries, he’s made a new career in photography and teaching healing arts.

An interview series with MHA Storytellers

Q: How have you benefitted from sharing your story?

A: I have been a story teller over a dozen times for small and large groups. I get the most benefit from talking to people afterwards, shaking hands or giving hugs, hearing their stories and how I made them feel less alone, or more empowered to be themselves.

Q: What do you think is the most important aspect of MHA’s work?

A: I think the most important part of MHA’s work is in helping destigmatize mental health through discussion programs and education.

* Sources: Clear22.org and PPMag.com