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What if you couldn't remember...

On a balmy August morning in 1996, Frank Favaloro '96 was preparing for one of those days that marks a turning point in any student's life. With a Ryder van parked in front of his parents' Norfolk, Mass., home, he was ready to embark on a new academic adventure at the University of Pennsylvania.

But then something went wrong. While attempting to lower a futon mattress from his attic, Favaloro lost his balance, fell down a flight of stairs and lost consciousness. After that fateful day in August, Favaloro's future would be forever altered.

By Edward Thomas

As the bright summer sunshine poured in the hospital window, Favaloro wondered why the sun would be so strong in November. After waking fully, he was tested by a doctor who used a set of questions designed to test a patient's level of consciousness. After Favaloro answered that the date was around Thanksgiving, the doctor let out an "Uh-huh," and left the room.

Favaloro was convinced it was late November 1995 and that he was home from Colby for Thanksgiving break. In fact it was late August 1996. It wasn't until a nurse told him the actual date that Favaloro realized something was very wrong. He could not remember his college graduation, his 22nd birthday or his acceptance to the University of Pennsylvania. These were the first indicators he was suffering from retrograde amnesia.

When his parents arrived at the hospital, a thoroughly disorientated Favaloro began trying to make sense of this baffling information. "Dad, I'm 21," he insisted. "What are they trying to tell me?"

At first it was difficult for his parents to understand that their son could not recall any events from the last nine months of his life. His father began recounting what he knew about Frank's



Frank Favaloro '96 worked with Miselis Professor of Chemistry Brad Mundy after his accident.

could about the recent past. Though he remembered starting his senior year, his memory stopped around the time of Thanksgiving.

Talking to friends from Colby was sometimes difficult. It was hard for them to comprehend that Favaloro really could not remember the events they had shared so recently. It was hard for them to guess what events Favaloro would most want to know about. "You've got people telling you it's nine months later than it is," Favaloro said. "You don't keep a checklist of things to tell a person when this happens."

His two best friends, senior-year roommates, contemplated playing jokes on Favaloro once they found out about the accident. "My first reaction was I wanted to make up some great stories about drunken orgies, but he'd never believe it," Kevin Hausmann '96 said.

But Casey McCullough '96 tried to offer more helpful feedback. "I just wanted him to concentrate on current topics. We talked about stuff going on presently instead of dwelling on what he didn't remember," McCullough said.

For Favaloro, though, there was a desperate desire to build up a specific list of events that had shaped his recent life. "You have

Though he remembered starting his senior year,

senior year at Colby and the summer he spent working there after graduation. When his father informed him that the day of the accident was the day he was supposed to be driving to Philadelphia to begin graduate school, Favaloro was stunned.

"Penn? Why the hell would I want to go to Penn?" he responded. "It's in Philadelphia!"

Trying not to overwhelm him, Favaloro's father gently gave him a rough outline of the last nine months of his life. When his parents got ready to leave the hospital for the night, his dad handed him his glasses, which had fallen off during the accident. Favaloro looked at the spectacles and asked, "Whose are these?"

Released from the hospital the next day, Favaloro walked outside and was still surprised by the hot August sun. And more surprises awaited him.

When he arrived home he had the strange feeling that someone had been in his bedroom and rearranged everything. Among his collection of Disney movies—which he had been accumulating for several years—were movies he knew hadn't yet been released. His mother joked that Frank could have his whole Christmas over again.

A self-described "control freak," Favaloro spent the next week contacting as many people as possible to find out all he

no idea of how smart or stupid you have been. . . . Is there a girlfriend that's upset because you haven't called her in a few days?" he wondered. He found out through McCullough and Hausmann that he had had three relationships during his senior year. He couldn't remember any of them.

Under the circumstances, admissions officers at Penn suggested Favaloro defer enrollment for a year and he agreed readily since he felt "cheated" of his senior year and was having doubts about attending Penn anyway.

He had applied to Penn, the University of California at Irvine and Dartmouth. Colby's Miselis Professor of Chemistry, Brad Mundy, had helped him secure the position at Penn, a school Favaloro did not know very well but considered a good career move. A postal snafu somehow derailed correspondence from Dartmouth, and both Favaloro and the college had concluded erroneously that there was a mutual lack of interest.

After the accident, Favaloro had doubts about the decision he did not remember making. As a native of suburban Massachusetts who spent his undergraduate years in rural Maine, Favaloro couldn't understand why he had wanted to go to the urban campus in Philadelphia for the next five or more years of his life. "It's fantastic for anyone's career to go there but it's not

the kind of environment I wanted to be in," he said.

At his doctor's recommendation, Favaloro decided to return to Colby to try to stimulate memory-triggers at the familiar campus. Colby cooperated, offering him two part-time jobs—one in admissions and another in the Chemistry Department, together again with his mentor, Brad Mundy.

His doctor told him he could expect his memory to return after two months, but Ed Yeterian, Colby's Katz Distinguished Teaching Professor of Psychology and an expert on neuropsychology, told him it could take up to 10 months.

"When it comes down to it, we don't know much about the brain," Favaloro said.

Talking with Yeterian helped Favaloro, he says, and reminded him that his situation could have been a lot worse. The professor told him of football players who sustained severe head injuries and could not remember anything they read. Other head-injury patients are incapable of forming new memories. "I kept thinking, it's only temporary and it could be worse," Favaloro said.

Being back at Colby was not always easy, though. On Homecoming Weekend, when many of Favaloro's friends returned to campus, he was approached by a woman he thought he did not know. She turned out to be a girlfriend he had met, dated and broken up with during senior year. After he told her about the accident, she responded, "Oh. Hi," and introduced herself.

Over the next few months, as Favaloro struggled to recapture the lost memories from his senior year, more Colby classmates emerged to rekindle their friendships. "There were many friends

Remembering that he never heard back from Dartmouth, Favaloro decided to find out what had happened to his application. He called Dartmouth and discovered that, though he had been invited to visit the Hanover, N.H., campus, the invitation had been lost in the mail. Favaloro jumped at the chance to visit Dartmouth and discovered a department where he felt comfortable. He notified Penn that he no longer planned to attend and enrolled at Dartmouth in the fall of 1997.

Reflecting on the ordeal, Favaloro is thankful for the role that fate played in his eventual decision to study at Dartmouth, where he now is researching biologically active compounds under three research scientists, Gordon Gribble, Michael Sporn, M.D., and Tadashi Honda.

Reflecting on his rare experience with amnesia, he said he learned that "The things you think can't be taken away from you, can." No memory and no event should ever be taken for granted, he says. "What is possibly just your normal, average day is really, really important."

Editor's Note:

The year that Favaloro spent at Colby following his accident and his decision to delay graduate school not only helped to retrieve memories from his senior year but solidified his affection for the College, he says. "Professor Mundy got me the job in chemistry and asked about work in admissions and biology and, in so doing, allowed me to come back to Colby," said Favaloro. "By allowing me to be an instructor for two introductory chemistry labs, he not only reinforced all of that material but increased my interest in teaching as a

Favaloro's memory stopped around Thanksgiving.

who went out of their way for me. It turns out that I had met and become friendly with many people during those nine lost months," Favaloro said.

Classmates sought him out to reconnect, often by phone as soon as they heard about the accident. Some had to reintroduce themselves. "They all had at their fingertips several stories for me with the dual intention of helping me put my recent past back together again and demonstrating how important our friendship was to them. It's quite an amazing thing," Favaloro said.

Favaloro's life began returning to normal during a biology lecture he was attending as a teacher's assistant at Colby in mid-October. Staring off into space, he was suddenly hit by the thought that his friend Melanie Puza '99's favorite ice-cream flavor was mint chocolate chip. After class he confirmed this tidbit—something he had learned within the nine-month period of senior year.

"I was told that if I aggressively pursued these memories they would not come back," he said. "I just had to relax sometimes." Over the next few months, more memories returned. Though Favaloro eventually could recall most of what previously had been lost to amnesia, he remained unsure of where he wanted to attend graduate school.

profession; it was my first experience 'on the other side of the desk.' I got to play a small part in the instruction of a few Colby students."

He also is grateful to Tom Kopp and Judy Levine Brody '58 in admissions for giving him the opportunity to work there and helping him learn the job, which entailed interviewing prospective students and reading applications.

Now in his second year of graduate school, Favaloro is studying biologically active compounds in hopes of identifying plant-based "secrets" that might help fight cancer, arthritis and other diseases in humans. "I'm enjoying myself up here despite the large amount of time spent in lab—it's a huge intellectual challenge for which Professor Mundy prepared me well," he said.

The amnesia is, so to speak, a distant memory. What little he hasn't retrieved, Favaloro says, probably isn't important anyway. "When you think about it, how much of each day can anybody reconstruct unless they were keeping a detailed journal?" he said. "I feel like I've got my entire life back now; there's no hole there."

Edward Thomas is news editor of *The Dartmouth* newspaper. His account of Frank Favaloro's recovery from retrograde amnesia originally appeared in *The Dartmouth* in November 1998. This version was edited and updated for publication in *Colby*.