

## ■ COVER STORY

Laughter is good medicine for Mark Dunham and his wife, Heather, shown attending their son's Little League game at Boise's Simplot Sports Complex. Arriving home from a therapy session at lunchtime one day, Heather Dunham mentioned having made tuna salad. "I'll just have a sanoopa," replied her husband, meaning tuna sandwich. She keeps a list of his malapropisms, which include calling his brother Dirk "Jerk." Says Heather: "The whole time, we just laugh."

KATHERINE JONES  
kjones@idahostatesman.com



A former CEO for Idaho Realtors and lobbyist for Boise State and



# 'I want to be relevant'

BY DAN POPKEY

dpopkey@idahostatesman.com

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Two months after his second stroke, Mark Dunham did his first load of laundry, one of the uncountable small steps toward recovery.

For his wife, Heather, it meant considerably more than other life skills Dunham was recapturing — putting on socks, using a pen or the business side of a knife, brushing his teeth.

**A**rriving home to the sound of a running washer, Heather Dunham inquired: Did he set the water temperature? Yup. Load size? Check. Put in the dirty clothes? Affirmative.

Add soap?

"He looked at me with a straight face and said, 'Yeah, 15 cups. Is that too much?' " Conjurung a 1973 "Brady Bunch" skit where Bobby pours in a whole box of detergent and winds up buried in suds, Dunham had pulled off the joke.

"Mark is a smart-ass," his wife

remembers, laughing with relief at the memory. "Right then, I knew he was back."

## WHATEVER IT TAKES

That was in March 2012. Three months later, Dunham, 52, resigned from his post as executive director of the Idaho Associated General Contractors to focus on his recovery.

But he remains a trustee of the College of Western Idaho and has since been appointed by Gov. Butch Otter to the board of the Idaho Housing and Finance Association. During the 2013

legislative session, he returned to his work at the Statehouse, where he's lobbied since 1985.

Lawyer and lobbyist Jeremy Pisca hired Dunham for part-time help on transportation issues. Pisca's first big break came in 2001 when Dunham chose him as general counsel for the Idaho Association of Realtors, where Dunham was CEO from 1985 to 2003.

"The No. 1 cardinal rule is, 'Buddies take care of buddies,'" Pisca says. "Regardless of whether he's had a stroke,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

Idaho contractors rebounds from strokes in 2012.



## ■ COVER STORY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

he's still one of the brightest minds and most well-respected individuals in the Capitol. And it's an extension of his therapy to get out and about."

Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry President Alex LaBeau got his first government relations job at the Realtors when Dunham hired him. LaBeau joined Pisca, Gallatin Public Affairs lobbyist Lyn Darrington and Banner Bank senior VP Tom Beitia in establishing a trust to raise money for more than 200 therapy sessions not covered by Dunham's insurance.

Dunham also receives disability payments from a private insurance plan and Social Security.

"Mark just worked his butt off," says LaBeau of Dunham's therapy. "He's got a way to go, but he's doing great."

LaBeau was among a group of friends who took turns sleeping on a couch in Dunham's room at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center after he suffered the second stroke on Jan. 13, 2012. Unable to reach the emergency call button during the second attack, Dunham was terrified of spending another night alone.

LaBeau's mother, Sue Pilier, had Dunham as an English student at Twin Falls High School. She says Dunham's network of support — wife, brothers, friends, doctors and therapists — was strong. "Even if Mark wanted to give up, they weren't going to let him," Pilier says. "They were determined to do whatever it took."

### DARK MOMENTS

The second stroke came three days after the first, killing the cells in about 20 percent of Dunham's brain. Unable to speak, he panicked as his wife shepherded in his mother and stepfa-



DARIN OSWALD / doswald@idahostatesman.com

Relearning ordinary words was an early challenge for Dunham, who was confused when family and friends kept calling his name. "What was a Mark? I had no clue about Mark. There was no alphabet, there was no language, there was nothing."

ther, who came from Twin Falls, and the oldest of his three brothers, Dan, who lives in Reno, Nev. He thought they were coming to say goodbye.

The Dunhams' son, Ethan, then 6, was on one of 13 consecutive play dates he had while his father was in and out of ICU.

"I was so distraught and confused," Dunham says. "I thought my life was over. They were going to tell me I was going to die."

His wife tried to reassure him that everything would be OK in time.

"He cried for a couple days," she remembered. "In his mind he thought I meant, 'Ethan and I will be fine when you're dead.' It took us a day or two to convince him he wasn't dying."

He was released after 18 days of hospitalization. Not long afterward, Dunham

asked his wife to drive him to Lucky Peak Reservoir and to take his portrait, alone on the right side of the frame with the lake and sagebrush steppe behind. He later posted the photo on his Dunham Family Blog to illustrate his loneliness and his recovery.

"I am so blessed because I could have died," Dunham wrote in May 2012. "In the early days, I thought that would be the best option for me and my family. My wife, brothers, family and friends would not allow me to give up."

In a darker post, Dunham expressed his gratitude but wrote of the grueling therapy to recover his speech to communicate, his right eye to drive, his right arm to type and his brain to read. "No one knows what I do every day," he wrote. "No one knows about my fears

and dreams and hopes. ... In the dark when I should be sleeping, I wonder what my future holds."

Dunham likened himself to a widower: "I am isolated in my grief about what I was before."

Says LaBeau: "The hardest thing for him was the isolation, looking from the outside in."

### THROUGH THE INFERNO

Jane Spencer, coordinator of the stroke program at Saint Al's, says depression is common in stroke victims. "It's hard to motivate yourself doing that rehab. But Mark had the insight in what he needed to do to get better. He knew he had trouble with speech. He knew he had trouble reading. He understood almost everything."

He also had his wife. The couple married in 2000,

### TIPS FOR STROKE SURVIVORS, CAREGIVERS

#### To aid stroke recovery

- Make sure you are on the proper medication to prevent another stroke.
- Participate in a stroke recovery program.
- Be patient; rehabilitation takes time.
- Join a stroke support group.
- Make sure your home is safe; avoid clutter and area rugs.
- Be aware that as many as half of all stroke survivors have depression at some time in their recovery.
- Exercise. It will help you manage your weight and your stress.

#### For caregivers

- Don't forget you need your rest, too.
- Document the small improvements, as stroke recovery comes in "baby steps."
- Never give up.
- Ask for help before you are overwhelmed. There are resources in the community for caregivers.
- Join a stroke support group. Caregivers need support, too.

each having been divorced once. "You couldn't ask for a better cheerleader," Spencer says.

"I just knew he was going to get better," says Heather Dunham, 50. "I knew how smart he was, how driven. And we had a son to raise. I never had any doubt."

Good news came shortly after the second stroke, when Lyn Darrington was the first person to read to Dunham, choosing magazine articles about America's first ladies and pop star Madonna.

"He told me he understood everything," says Darrington, who has a stroke survivor in her family. "It

was a real breakthrough for him to know that comprehension was still there."

Dunham's brother Steve, like him an avid reader with whom he swapped books, was thrilled. "I still credit Lyn for that," says Steve Dunham. "He was just sitting there enjoying the hell out of it."

"Lyn opened my eyes to treating him more normally," Heather Dunham says. "I was pampering him too much."

Help also came from Stuart Davis, a lobbyist for the Association of Idaho Highway Districts, who had his own near-death experience as a passenger in a 1999 plane crash.

"You look at yourself in the mirror, whether there's an actual mirror or not, and there's something in your soul that says, 'I'm going to get better. I'm not going to accept this,'" Davis says. "We walked through the middle of Dante's Inferno and turned around and laughed at it."

### 'SPEECHING' NOT SLOBBERING

A big moment came on St. Patrick's Day 2012, nine weeks after Dunham's second stroke. Friends organized a fundraiser at the Mardi Gras ballroom in Downtown Boise, attracting more than 500 people.

"A lot of people expected to see Mark in a wheelchair with his mouth slumping and drooling," Heather Dunham says. "I just wanted him to speak and let people know he was still in there. He's still funny. He's still got everything."

Dunham needed a hand to reach the stage. Even with his communications degree from Boise State University and his experience giving hundreds of speeches, he was testing his limits.

"I normally speech a lot," he began, revealing one of the little disconnects then quite evident. "I'm very blessed. I wasn't sure I



## LOBBYING ■

would be here. It was a very bad stroke."

He thanked his friends, his brothers, his wife. "Her love — it's everything for me."

And closed with: "Thank you, everything. Love you."

Heather Dunham told the crowd her husband's brain was like a box of 1,000 index cards tossed randomly. "We still have them. We just have to put them back in order, one by one."

Dunham still sometimes needs help with the right word, though not nearly as often.

He remembers that night clearly. "I was nervous. I thought nobody would come. I was very shaky on my feet, but when I turned around there were people from first grade in Twin Falls, college friends I hadn't seen in years, Realtors from all over the nation, AGC staff. I almost started to cry because it's just me. Why are they helping me?"

### HEALING WITH HUMOR

Popular among State-house regulars, Dunham is known for his easy, joking manner. For two years, he was president of the non-profit corporation representing lobbyists.

"He has not made any appreciable enemies in almost 30 years," Davis says. "He's just a very trusted, nice guy. He does things out in the open, and there's no second and third and fourth agendas. That's why he enjoys the respect he does."

In addition to tracking Pisca's Transportation Economic Development Zones bill, which failed in a House committee, Dunham set out to meet the largest class of freshman lawmakers in Idaho history. "The Legislature wouldn't wait for me," he says.

Another task was reviving the spark of his humor. Sitting with Dunham in a Capitol hallway offers a testament to his progress. House Majority Leader

Mike Moyle, R-Star, passes with a word of advice about talking to reporters.

"Who are you?" replies Dunham. "I had a stroke, remember?"

But he gets wobbly on the question of returning to full-time work.

"I'm still wondering if I can work again," Dunham told a stroke support group in Caldwell, where he appeared at the request of Spencer, from Saint Al's. "I've been working at the Legislature, but I don't know if I can really do it."

Minutes later, as if recognizing the example he's trying to set for other survivors, he corrected himself. "When I said I'm not sure if I'll work again, I will. I couldn't not work. I want to be relevant. I also want to help people. So, I'm going to work again."

As an original board member at CWI, Dunham was urged to stay on by colleagues and President Bert Glandon.

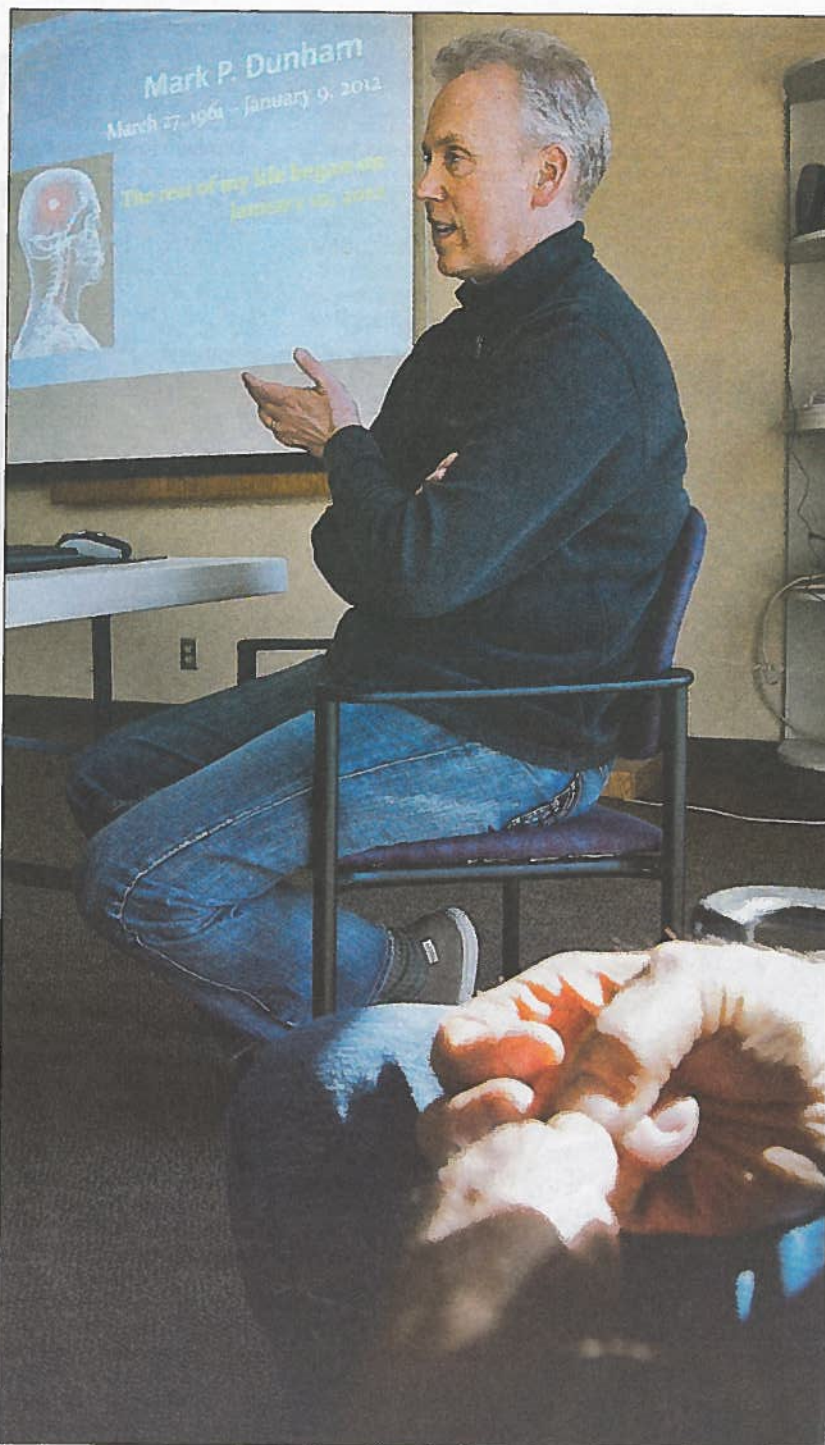
"He's a bedrock for this board," says Trustee Mary Niland, who works with disabled workers as CEO of Western Idaho Training Co. "I know how difficult it's been for Mark, and to see the passion and the time and effort he's put in is just remarkable."

At CWT's April board meeting, Dunham was engaged in questioning staff, faculty and students. But when he moved to adopt complicated new compensation guidelines for adjunct staff, Glandon stepped in to read the motion aloud.

"Thank goodness we talked him into staying," Glandon said afterward. "He is a huge asset. His commitment to recover 100 percent is all about the human spirit succeeding — not just surviving, but succeeding."

### MARK AND ETHAN

There's one important person in Dunham's life who



DARIN OSWALD / doswald@idahostatesman.com

Speaking to stroke survivors in Caldwell in April, Dunham was accompanied by brothers Steve, hands in foreground, and Dirk. Both live in Eagle and are woodworkers. Dunham told the group that remembering their trade and a black comb belonging to their late father sparked an epiphany as he worked with a language therapist. "I thought, maybe that's my dad's comb. My brothers are carpenters. I used to build houses with my brothers. A hammer! That was my first insight that I had an identity."

### THE DUNHAM RESUME

Dunham graduated from Twin Falls High School and earned a bachelor's degree in communication from Boise State University.

From 1985 to 2003, he was CEO of the Idaho Association of Realtors. In 2004, he was hired as Boise State's director of government relations. He also served as interim vice president of university advancement.

In 2006, he left Boise State to start a real estate and consulting school. Later he became vice president of the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry. The following year, he was hired as executive director of the Idaho Associated General Contractors.

Also in 2007, Dunham was appointed as a founding board member of the College of Western Idaho. Voters in Ada and Canyon counties elected him in 2008 and 2012.

After suffering strokes on Jan. 10 and Jan. 13, 2012, he resigned from AGC. In December, he joined Risch Pisca, a Boise law and policy firm as a part-time lobbyist. In January, Dunham was appointed to the Idaho Housing and Finance Association board.

Dunham's volunteer service includes membership on the boards of the Idaho chapter of the American Heart Association, Idaho Botanical Garden, Idaho Partners for Homebuyer Education, Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce, Valley Regional Transit and COMPASS, the regional planning association for Ada and Canyon counties. He also has been president of the BSU Alumni Association and was on the presidential screening committee that helped hire Boise State President Bob Kustra.



## ■ PROFILE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

continues to process what "stroke" means: his son.

The day Dunham was released from Saint Al's, Jan. 27, 2012, was Ethan's seventh birthday. The family went to Red Robin, Ethan's favorite joint. But the lights and noise were too much for his dad. When Dunham needed to use the restroom, Ethan

held his hand and led the way, a story that still brings tears to Dunham's eyes in the retelling.

"After that, he really didn't want to see me," Dunham says. "He was like, 'Dad is so different.' He would say 'Hello,' but he didn't really talk to me until they cleared me to ride a bike in July."

On those rides, Ethan cautions his dad, who has

lost his peripheral vision on the right: "Daddy, be careful: There's a garbage can. There's a car."

Normalcy advances between father and son, just as Dunham works to rewire his brain. "We're trying to re-establish our relationship, but basically it seems more like a friendship," Dunham told the stroke support group.

Mom handles discipline

and homework, things Dad used to do. "It's not that he doesn't respect me, it's just different. My son will say, 'Dad can't do that now.'"

Dunham had to give up helping coach the Little League team where Ethan wears No. 11, in honor of Kellen Moore. LaBeau is the head coach, and the team includes LaBeau's son, A.J., a close pal of Ethan's.

At a recent game, Dunham got his son water and handed him his bat. Dad cheered as Ethan beat out a grounder for a single. He laughed as Ethan returned after being forced out at second, as full of joy as if he'd scored the winning run.

Unlike other boys, Ethan leaves his mitt with his father, not on the bench. Returning from cleanly field-

ing a grounder at third base, Ethan threw his glove, but Dad wasn't ready and it fell to the grass.

"Ethan?" said Dunham, eyeing the mitt.

Silently, Ethan retrieved the leather and tossed it again. Dunham made the catch. And both Dunham men smiled.

Dan Popkey: 377-6438, Twitter: @IDS\_politics



KATHERINE JONES / doswald@idahostatesman.com

Mark Dunham still shudders at the memory of his son, Ethan, right, seeing him babbling on the floor of their Boise Bench home as he had his first stroke. "Call 911!" Ethan shouted. The 8-year-old's fears sometimes make him standoffish, Mark says. "It took a long time for him to relate to me, to talk to me," Dunham said of his little third baseman.