

Court program educates offenders

By LISA REDMOND, Sun Staff

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STONEHAM -- Nadine Amari says she was once the "life of the party," drinking and drugging at every spare moment.

"I was pretty polluted," she says.

The party ended on March 6, 1980, when a tractor-trailer struck her car on Interstate 495 in Lowell. She was thrown from the car.

"They found me in a ditch," Amari says.

Amari was taken to a Lowell hospital. It would be the first of many hospitals and rehabilitation centers she would visit for the next nine years.

She spent six months in a coma. She awoke with severe brain damage. She had to learn to walk, talk and eat again.

She was 23.

Now 49, she still doesn't remember the accident. And she still continues to have trouble with her speech, walking and with her balance.

This week, she stood before first-time traffic and criminal offenders in the Stoneham police station, and told her story.

"I never thought this would happen to me. I came here to speak to you so you won't end up like this," said Amari, who lives in Woburn.

She spoke as part of the Brains at Risk program, sponsored by the private, nonprofit Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. The Brains at Risk program, now in its 10th year, is an awareness program for people 17 and older with first-time convictions for drunken driving, drug possession, violent crimes or other behaviors that may lead to brain injury.

The group tries to educate people on the risks of brain injury and the impact on families and society. Brains at Risk holds 19 monthly

meetings across the state, from the Worcester Skilled Care Center to the Burlington Police Department.

A traumatic brain injury occurs every 23 seconds in this country, with more than 1.5 million people sustaining these injuries each year through car accidents, falls, strokes, sports injuries, shaken baby, assaults and more. Brain injuries are called the "silent epidemic" because they are not as visible as other injuries, but have lifelong consequences. More than half of all brain injuries are alcohol- or drug-related, according to the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

A traumatic brain injury occurs when a blow to or powerful movement of the head causes a permanent injury to the brain. The result can be among many things, vision or hearing loss, memory impairment, depression and problems with balance and speech.

"Presenting the financial, emotional and lifestyle impact of reckless driving on families, society and the offender's own life comes as a powerful and gripping reality check," said Celeste Hurley, who started Brains at Risk in 1996 and currently serves on the board of directors for the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

Each session runs two hours and costs the participant \$30. About 25 to 30 people come to a session.

More than 3,500 people are referred to the program each year, mostly through the courts, including courts in Ayer, Concord, Lowell, and Woburn.

Pamela Bush, of the Brains at Risk program, says Lowell District Court Judge James McGuinness has been involved from the beginning.

"I observed the program and am convinced that it makes a big difference on offenders," McGuinness says. "I use it all the time and urge others to do the same."

In Lowell Superior Court last October, Judge Elizabeth Fahey sentenced first-time offender James Dorr, 40, of Lowell, to five years probation after he pleaded guilty to misdemeanor motor-vehicle homicide for the 2004 death of his friend Anthony R. Marino III.

Dorr must attend the Brains at Risk program as part of his probation.

Bush said a lot of programs through the courts are punitive, but this one is designed to educate.

"No one drinks and drives with the goal of injuring themselves or a friend, but it happens. The idea is to stop the behavior to prevent those consequences," Bush says.

Danielle Wohl was a 17-year-old Michigan high-school student and a passenger in a car driven by a friend going to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in May 1988 when her friend's car was hit by a drunken driver.

Wohl, who wasn't wearing a seat belt, was ejected and suffered permanent brain damage.

The once-aspiring model is now 35, legally blind and has severe memory issues. She never finished high school, can't work and needs the help of a personal assistant to function.

Wohl, who now lives in Lexington, says she isn't looking for sympathy. Her goal is to send one message: "Once you are brain injured there is no turning back."

For more information visit the Worcester-based Brain Injury Association's Web site at www.mbia.net.

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