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Acton's Claire Wright raises brain injury awareness

Zoom

Photos



Courtesy photo

Claire Wright of Acton is part of a brain injury public information campaign.

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Acton, Mass. —

Claire Wright has a passion for Shakespeare.

In a recent interview at her family home in Acton, Wright, 18 and a senior at Concord Academy, spoke with excitement about an upcoming trip to England, to visit family and friends, and to participate in a student theater program with the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company through the academy's drama department.

Her success marked not only the beginning of a new enjoyment, for Wright, it marked the start of a new life.

She recently brought her skills — and her personal experience — to a different sort of role —an educational program, including a video, sponsored by the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

Wright said she wants teens and young adults who suffer a concussion, as she did, to know they are not alone, and that there is help.

Her journey began at age 13, when a ball struck her left temple while playing defense in a soccer practice for a game with the Acton Youth Soccer League's team in the Boston Area Youth Soccer League.

"I blacked out," she said. "No one saw me get hit. I got up and went back out."

She didn't think anymore about it, despite having sustained a head injury the previous year on a ski trip.

"I just didn't put two and two together," she said.

But in the weeks after her soccer accident, Wright, then an eighth-grade honor student at R.J. Grey Junior High School, said she began to experience chronic dizziness, vision problems and excruciating headaches.

"I stared at a page, and had no idea what it meant," she said, adding she forgot all the math and French she had learned in her studies.

Her mother, Lucinda Wright, said a CAT scan revealed the possibility of a concussion — an injury now a common topic of concern but at that time rarely addressed.

They said physicians told Wright she'd feel better in a few days. But the symptoms did not improve, sometimes leading to long absences from school.

Mother and daughter both say school teachers and administrators did not respond supportively.

They said some attributed her sudden plunge in grades to stress, or a lack of motivation or focus.

“I got a huge amount of pushback from teachers and administrators,” Wright said. “One person said, ‘Are you making this up?’”

They said the school did furnish a math tutor, and that a few members of the school community, including one history teacher, attempted to help.

The Wrights filed no formal complaint; school officials were not available to comment on the Wright family’s concerns.

A team at Boston Children’s Hospital also helped greatly, but at the time didn’t have a clinic specifically for concussions, the Wrights said.

After searching extensively, the Wright family found help through the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. Through the association, they found a specialist, Beth Adams, who works with adolescents who have suffered concussions.

Her rehabilitation involved several measures, including re-evaluating medications for pain, as well as helping Wright re-learn some fundamental skills such as reading words and numbers properly.

“You have to re-wire your brain,” Wright said. “You have push through with keep working at it.”

Sometimes, this meant seemingly rote tasks such as sitting with a relatively easy book, and re-reading the passages several times.

In this way, she said, the brain reacquires the steps it takes to assign phonetic sounds to letters and put them in a logical order to appreciate the concepts expressed in the passages.

Similarly, Wright said she would work on mathematics problems, such as beginning algebra, working through the problem-solving processes and grasping the value of numerals and symbols.

Losing memories of her studies led to her repeating the eighth grade – not at R.J. Grey, but at Nashoba Brooks School, a private school in Concord, followed by high school at Concord Academy.

Reaching out

In time, she channeled her experience into a means to help others.

In 2007, the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts -- a chapter of the Brain Injury Association of America -- asked her to participate in a panel discussion at a workshop for coaches, athletic directors, students and families.

“Reviews from that session were unbelievable,” said association spokesman Pam Bush. “When you hear about it from someone who has been through it, it really makes a difference.”

Bush said the success of that panel and the fact that people were so receptive to their approach led the association to begin working on a video entitled, “Play Smart: Understanding Sports Concussion.”

They asked Wright, along with a number of other young concussion sufferers, to join brain injury professionals in participating in the video.

Bush praised Wrights’ supportive parents and added, “Claire was outstanding,” said Bush. “She was articulate. She’s an attractive young woman, but it’s important to remember that this could affect anyone in any sport, and I think that was part of the message.”

The videos have been viewed more than 900 times online, and more than 200 DVDs have been distributed, with a reported audience of over 24,000. Chapters of the Brain Injury Association of America in four other states have expressed interest in using the video on their own websites and for distribution, Bush said.

Changing times

State lawmakers last year passed legislation requiring all student athletes to complete an online program on sports-related head injuries before participating on a school team.

The law also states that if a student athlete loses consciousness during a game or practice, the student must be taken out of play, and requires written certification from a medical professional before the student may return.

“We’ve learned a lot more in the past five to 10 years,” said Peter Cacciola, athletic trainer at Acton-Boxborough Regional High School. “It’s becoming more recognized. Kids are reporting it more.”

Students in the Acton-Boxborough regional school district, which includes the high school and R..J Grey Junior High School, must sign a form stating that they have completed requirements including the state-mandated training. They also have to consent to informing coaches about previous injuries before the start of a new athletic season.

Cacciola said there are now procedures in place to assist students with identified head injuries, including daily checks of an injured student’s cognition and balance. The students must be free of any symptoms seven days before they can return to physical activity.

Her mother, Lucinda Wright, is gratified by the increased education, but said she hopes for continued awareness and a sense of priorities when it comes to athletics.

“You get a lot of credit for being a team player, and sometimes they play through the pain,” she said.

Nowadays, Wright says she functions well, gets good grades, and enjoys a life filled with interests fostered at Concord Academy, including participation in the school’s Model United Nations, serving as head of the school’s chorus, and taking the stage to revel in delicious roles such as one of the witches of “MacBeth.”

The loss of friends she felt in starting anew outside the school system stays with her, but so does hope and a sense that she is helping others by sharing her experience.

“You can’t stop all the concussions, but you can raise the awareness,” Wright said. “One big challenge is knowing that you don’t have to feel like an outcast.”

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