

Attleboro Sun

Life changed in instant

BY AMY DeMELIA SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

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Jen Martelli of North Attleboro suffered a brain injury 16 years ago from a motor vehicle accident in which she was not wearing a seat belt. (Staff photo by Mark Stockwell)

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NORTH ATTLEBORO - The moment that changed Jen Martelli's life came at a Father's Day barbecue 16 years ago, when she slipped into the passenger seat of a friend's car to pick up some frozen lemonade.

Minutes later, a horrific car accident left Martelli, then a carefree 17-year-old who was not wearing the car's broken seatbelt, with a devastating brain injury that left her in a coma for more than two months.

Now 33, Martelli is sharing her story at schools across the state through a program run by the Brain Injury Association to encourage students to wear seatbelts.

The accident occurred in 1995, when Martelli and a friend decided to run a quick errand to pick up a treat for everyone at the Father's Day cookout. She climbed into the passenger seat, unaware her life was about to change.

"I can remember my friend telling me the seatbelt didn't work, but I don't have any memory of what happened next," she said.

Martelli knows what happened next from the information gathered from friends and family: The car she was riding in collided with a truck that was towing a car.

The accident crushed the passenger side of the car where Martelli was sitting and she was trapped beneath the dashboard.

Martelli was rushed to Rhode Island Hospital and given last rites.

But she clung to life in a coma and awoke more than two months later.

"I can remember seeing people but I couldn't respond. I remember seeing my brother come in before he went to college. My brain knew he was there," she said. "Two friends came in to say goodbye before they went to college, and one of them said 'Can you say goodbye to us Jenny?' and I whispered it."

Once Martelli woke up and was recovering from brain surgery, the challenges kept coming. "I had to learn to walk all over again. I had to go to speech class," she said. "It was hard."

Today, Martelli doesn't have any physical reminders of the accident, but she has issues with her memory.

"My long term memory is great, but my short term memory is awful," she said. "Twenty minutes later, I forget if I brushed my teeth or where I put things."

"I have other little impairments. I really have to focus - forget multitasking- and I can't hold a job. I get headaches a lot, and can get really overwhelmed."

Martelli said she is grateful for her 3-year-old daughter, Hannah, who loves to give her helpful reminders.

"She's awesome. I'm so happy I was given a second chance to be a mom," Martelli said.

"When I was 17, I never thought it was going to happen. She is so helpful. I ask her where did I put this, and she'll find it for me."

Martelli is telling her story as part of a Faces of Brain Injury banner created by the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. The exhibit travels to high schools throughout the state.

She also participates in the organization's prevention programs, including Think A-Head at high schools; Brains At Risk, a court referral program and Gateway, a program for at-risk teens.

When talking to students, Martelli emphasizes how quickly life can change with one decision - the decision not to wear a seatbelt.

"The accident really made me a better person," she said. "It really made me want to help people.

"It's hard to know that I'm not the same Jen Martelli I used to be, but I have to try and understand and accept the person the Jen Martelli I am now."

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