

Race for Traumatic Brain Injuries 5K to be held Saturday

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By **Bill Wells**

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Submitted photoChicopee's Ashley Sarkis, who hit her skull after falling down a flight of cement steps in February, will host the Race for Traumatic Brain Injuries 5K Saturday at 9 a.m. at Forest Park.

Four months ago, Ashley Sarkis endured the worst physical pain of her life.

The 22-year-old Chicopee resident, however, feels lucky – lucky to be almost back to normal, and lucky to be able to function at all.

Sarkis was leaving a building Feb. 5. She started to go down some cement steps. That's as much she can remember.

"I don't remember anything. I guess someone found me at the bottom of the stairs," she said. "I don't remember the fall. I just remember waking up in the ICU and thinking, 'What the hell happened to me?'"

Sarkis had fallen down the cement steps, hitting the back of her skull. She stayed in the intensive care unit at Bay State Medical Center in Springfield for two days before spending two more days on the neurology floor.

"I had six centimeters of blood on the frontal lobe of my brain," the 2006 Cathedral High School graduate said. "From hitting the cement, my brain had gone back and forth, back and forth, and it started to bleed on the frontal lobe.

"I was lucky enough to be just on the line where they said they were going to wait and see what happens in a day, and if the bleeding didn't stop in a day they were going to have to do this or do that for surgery. I was very fortunate they did not have to do anything."

Sarkis was out of danger, but she was far from done with her ordeal. She had migraines, felt pressure in her head and was in pain. She also felt miserable and mentally exhausted.

"I was on six weeks of bed rest and it wasn't until I hit the one-month mark where I woke up and said, 'I'm going to make it through today.' It took me a month before I didn't wake up in tears."

Sarkis was told she could make a full recovery by August. She knows she isn't 100 percent just yet, but she's getting closer. She said, "I'll forget what happens, or I'll go read a paper or read a book and I notice little things that weren't there before, whether it's remembering or trying to write what I'm thinking, or I'm writing backward or talking backward. It's little things."

The Springfield native started to poke around on the Internet, looking for a way to make a donation toward an organization that deals with brain injuries. She's gotten herself much more involved than that, deciding to put on the Race for Traumatic Brain Injuries, with all of the proceeds from the 5K race going toward the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

The first-year race is set for Saturday at 9 a.m. at Springfield's Forest Park. The entry fee is \$15. Serving as race director has been therapeutic for Sarkis, who picked up running last year and runs 25 or so miles a week.

"There are so many people who have had injuries to their brain that weren't half as bad as mine but they were in a coma or they were this or that," she said. "I couldn't accept the fact that I was OK. I was going through something terrible but I was going to be OK.

"I feel honored to help out the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts."

For more information, email ashleynsarkis@gmail.com.

HITTING THE WAVES: The Westfield YMCA Wave Triathlon will be held June 12 at Hampton Ponds State Park in Westfield. The event begins at 8 a.m. The sprint distance includes a .3-mile swim, 13-mile bike and 3-mile run, and the super sprint has a 300-yard swim, 6.3-mile bike and 1-mile run. Go to www.wavetriathlon.com for more information.