

Steve Machnik gives voice to a silent epidemic

Photos



Bear Cieri/for MetroWest and Wicked local

A skiing accident left Steve Machnik in a coma for weeks and forever changed his life. But the Framingham native has battled back and now sees his role as putting “a face on the problem” of traumatic brain injury.

By Danielle Ameden

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He thought helmets “look stupid,” so, naturally, Steve Machnik wasn't wearing one that day in '95 when he hit the slopes at Utah's Snowbird ski resort.

“It's a great example of what not to do,” said Machnik.

That February day 15 years ago, the active, 37-year-old marketing executive and Framingham native's life permanently changed when he suffered a traumatic brain injury while on a ski trip with friends.

“I didn't even know what a brain injury was. I had no idea,” said Machnik, now 53 and an ambassador for the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

After the accident, Machnik, who was living in Westborough at the time, was hospitalized in a coma for several weeks in Utah. Then, he came home and began rehabilitation, underwent therapy and slowly fought back.

But he would never be the same.

He was now dependent on others. His sense of balance and coordination was lost. He could no longer run, bike or sing. He couldn't keep up with the job he loved with VMark Software, which is now part of IBM.

But Machnik, a father of three, now living in Sudbury, is a survivor.

He found another job, albeit at a lower level, in Framingham. He plays bass guitar with the Holliston-based band "Sharp Dressed Men." He can't run 10K races anymore, but he works out and swims for exercise.

And despite his handicap, he has found his voice and now tells his story as an advocate for brain injury awareness and prevention.

As he calls it, his role is to "put a face on the problem."

"I was riding high before. I had it all," he said, and now, "my life is just about totally different and I've learned to be happy making other people happy."

Machnik has delivered a popular presentation at Lions Clubs in the area, including in Natick, Holliston, Medway and Millis, and his speaking circuit is soon set to include local rotary clubs.

"The objective of course is to raise money for the Brain Injury Association," he said.

As part of his message, Machnik talks about the importance of head protection and wearing helmets.

"Wearing a helmet is much more acceptable now than it was" when he hit his head on the Utah ski mountain, Machnik said.

There's also the statistics.

One is that 5.3 million Americans, or about 2 percent of the U.S. population, are living with traumatic brain injuries, according to the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, based in Westborough.

That figure compares to Centers for Disease Control data that shows 15,000 Americans died from AIDS in 2007. And in 2006, 191,410 women were diagnosed with breast cancer and 40,820 died from the disease.

"We're showing that brain injuries are the silent epidemic," said the BIA's Kelly Buttiglieri, coordinator of ambassador program.

It's an issue that sometimes makes the news.

As Machnik notes, there was the fluke accident in which Hollywood actress Natasha Richardson died after bumping her head last March while taking a beginner's skiing lesson at a Canadian resort. She was not wearing a helmet and initially did not appear to be injured.

There's Olympic hopeful and snowboarder Kevin Pearce, who suffered a massive brain injury while training for the Vancouver Winter games.

The bottom line is "brain injuries can happen to anyone at any time," Buttiglieri said, and they occur every 23 seconds.

For more information, visit www.biama.org.

(Danielle Ameden can be reached at 508-626-4416 or dameden@cnc.com.)