

Burlington Post

Students get lesson on risk taking

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Glenn Barnes lived hard, had fun and sometimes took risks, and along the way he made one life-altering error.

Now 37, the Mississauga resident has been disabled for more than 13 years.

Alone in a spotlight that highlighted him in his wheelchair, Barnes was the keynote speaker at a recent safety talk put on by Canadian National Police. The CN Smartrisk Heroes program brought Barnes and a thought-provoking slide show to Nelson High School for a discussion on playing safe.



The Smartrisk presentation is for high school students but there is another program for JK-Grade 8 students called Operation Lifesaver.

Every year, CN Police officers make All Aboard for Safety presentations to more than 100,000 students in more than 700 schools in North America to talk about general safety and the dangers around railroad tracks. Barnes makes about 20 of the talks per year.

TAKE SMART RISKS

"Taking risks is what life's all about -- but taking smart risks," Barnes emphasized to the teenagers crowded into their high school's gymnasium to hear him speak.

"It was a bad choice that I made that changed my life forever."

Barnes recalled it was the summer of 1992 and he and a group of friends had just finished playing some pick-up basketball. They decided to cool off on the hot day by jumping into a backyard pool.

"One friend said, 'Let's jump off the (short pool hut) roof,' which we had done hundreds of times. I said, 'Let's make it more interesting and jump off the garage roof.' He said it was too far," he said of his friend's observation, but that didn't deter the athletic and adventurous Barnes.

Then a robust 23 years old -- and about to start his first job as a high school teaching assistant -- Barnes said he got up on the garage roof and ran from one end to the other trying to gather enough speed to carry him well into the pool. He had decided he would dive head first, not leading with his feet, so as not to possibly break an ankle or leg.

"I didn't get into the pool enough to clear the shallow end and my head hit the bottom of the pool and my neck snapped. I was dazed and when I opened my eyes I could see blood all around in the water.

"I thought if I could just move my head I'd be all right. That was probably the worst thing I could do. I could hear the bones cracking in my head."

Barnes told the rapt teens in the audience that the next thing he remembers is being in a hospital bed with people running around him screaming.

In the weeks that followed in the hospital, Barnes said he realized his days of playing sports and officiating junior and senior hockey games was likely over.

"I have only partial use of my arms but not my hands," nor his legs, he told the Nelson students. "I didn't realize it (paralysis) also meant I would lose control of my bowel and bladder functions. I have poor circulation in my legs -- all these things I learned over the months (of recovery)."

Regular visits by his parents, family and friends to the rehabilitation centre, where he essentially lived at first, helped him cope somewhat, he said.

Following his speech, the talkative and amiable Barnes answered a slew of direct questions from the curious teens.

"My friends' reaction? We were all a little freaked out about it. We don't really talk about it, not that I'm not willing to. We are still friends and hang out."

HAD SECOND THOUGHTS

One of the things he misses most, he told the students, was officiating hockey.

"It was invigorating being in a rink with 5,000 people screaming."

He admits his serious relationship with a woman at the time suffered because of his disability.

"We had been together five years before that and we stayed together for about one year after I was hurt. One day she came over to my apartment in Brampton and I told her I didn't want to be a burden on her growth, having children, whatever. It was rough at first (breaking up) but I then realized everything doesn't always go your way.

"... but it'll only be as bad as you let it," he added.

He had a final word of advice for any would-be thrill seekers.

"I'd do anything I could to help you but once you leave home it is your life and it's up to you."

After the talk, one student told the Post she had recently taken a risk in a sport but had second thoughts about doing it again after listening to Barnes.

"I've ridden a snowboard without a helmet," said Jasmin Bayoumi.

The Grade 9 student said she had a helmet but didn't wear it and not long ago hit her head on a railing. She wasn't hurt badly but said that after hearing Barnes' tale she will wear one from now on.

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Barnes is the provincial co-ordinator of the Tetra Society of Ontario. Tetra matches skilled technicians, designers and engineers with disabled people seeking to gain as much independence as possible in a range of areas such as self-care, school, work, and leisure. These professionals volunteer their time to work one-on-one with the disabled client, often producing a number of simple devices that aid in personal care, mobility, communications, household needs, vocational/education needs and recreation.

Tetra Society of Ontario, Mississauga, 1-877-688-8762, e-mail: info@tetrasociety.org or website www.tetrasociety.org.

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The Transportation Safety Board said there were 1,249 train accidents in Canada in 2005, up from 1,138 in 2004 and well above the 1,055 five-year average. More than 100 people (104) died in such accidents in 2005, mostly at crossings and as trespassers, up from 101 in 2004, and above the five-year average of 93.

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Robert Bateman High School will host the Smartrisk Heroes program on Tuesday, May 16.