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Article published Dec 3, 2009

Woman on personal quest to prevent brain injuries Son's plight spurs activism

By Sandy Quadros Bowles CORRESPONDENT

WESTBORO — Arlene Korab worried, as mothers will do, when her son Kevin, 18, moved to Boston in the fall of 1980 to attend Northeastern University.

She feared what might happen to her son in “the big city.”

She could not have imagined that disaster would strike just two miles from her Westboro home.

Kevin returned home the first weekend after orientation to have a final reunion with friends before they headed to their respective colleges.

He was riding with a friend when the car hit a tree. The driver walked away uninjured. But Kevin was trapped, and rescuers needed the Jaws of Life to remove him from the vehicle.

He suffered no obvious injuries. No bones were broken. He had no cuts. He was not bleeding.

But his life — and the lives of his family members — changed forever. Kevin suffered a severe brain injury caused when his head hit the dashboard. He was in a coma.

“I couldn’t believe it,” Ms. Korab said. “I thought, ‘He’ll wake up and he’ll be fine.’”

But he remained in the coma for six months.

When he came out of the coma, he was paralyzed on his right side. His speech was badly affected and he had serious short-term memory problems.

As her son went through rehabilitation, Ms. Korab reached out to others for support and advice from people who had experienced what she was going through.

When she heard about a group dedicated to supporting people affected by brain injuries, she decided to drive out to meet members of the organization.

She followed the directions, but could not find the organization headquarters building. When she returned home, she called and realized why she had gotten lost. The group met in the kitchen of a residential home.

From these grass-roots beginnings, and with her active support, the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts grew.

Today, Ms. Korab serves as executive director of the association. They have expanded from a budget of less than \$2,000 and two staff members in 1981 to an operating budget of nearly \$3 million in fiscal 2009 and a staff of 22 with headquarters on Lyman Street.

But the goal remains the same: To provide support for those with brain injuries and their families and to advocate for them.

One of the association’s greatest achievements was to reach a settlement last year with the state to allow 2,000 people with traumatic brain injuries to move out of nursing facilities and other institutions and into integrated community settings.

Today Kevin is 47 and lives in such a house in Dartmouth, with roommates and support staff available 24-7. His speech can be difficult to understand, Ms. Korab said, and he has no memory of events after the accident, although his memory of life prior to the accident is good.

He is in a wheelchair because he is paralyzed on one side. Still, he closely follows current events and regularly beats the staff at Scrabble.

He goes to dinner, to the movies, takes vacations. This is a “much more normal way to live” than in an institution, Ms. Korab said.

In addition to providing support for those, like Kevin, who suffer from brain injuries, the association works to prevent the injuries from happening at all.

In Massachusetts, 44,000 people suffer a traumatic brain injury every year. More than 85 percent of all brain injuries are preventable, according to the association.

Properly fitted helmets reduce the risk of brain injuries by 88 percent. Seat belts are 57 percent effective in preventing traumatic and fatal brain injuries.

The association recently teamed up with New England Patriots player Logan Mankins to raise awareness of the risk and awareness of brain injury. His brother suffered a brain injury while working on the family ranch.

Mr. Mankins participates in the association’s campaign “Our Kids Wear Helmets and So Should You.”

Ms. Korab said, “That’s a pretty powerful message for kids.”

Mr. Mankins also urges children who have been hit hard in a game to sit out until they have fully recovered.

That echoes the message the association delivers. “Better to lose a game than to lose a child’s life,” Ms. Korab said.

For more information on the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, including volunteer opportunities, visit www.biama.org.

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