

The Survivor

Two drinks, one ride, change one woman's life

STORY BY
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"I wasn't born using a wheelchair."

This is how Kelly Narowski introduced her story, the one she tells to thousands of people every year.

One day, years ago, after a couple of drinks, Narowski was enjoying a scenic ride down the Pacific Coast Highway in Santa Barbara. The vehicle's driver, her friend Heather, asked to switch places. Heather decided she was far too drunk to be behind the wheel.

Narowski figured she was fine, made her way around the car and slipped into the driver's seat. She wasn't wearing her seatbelt.

"That was the last time I ever walked," she said. "I had only had two drinks the day I put myself in a wheelchair. Two drinks. That's it. That's all it took."

Driving intoxicated wasn't the norm for Narowski. She usually wasn't much of a drinker anyway. But she'd been a risky driver for years.

"I didn't get it. I didn't get that those speed limit signs were there for a reason. I got five speeding tickets while I was in college. I always called my lawyer to get me out of it. And he always did."

"Years later, not 'getting it' would cost me my legs."

Now, she travels the country telling her story, mostly to members of the Armed Services, in the hopes that she can help keep others from making the same bad choice that changed her life forever.

"We feel safe in a car. We get in cars every day. You are more likely as a U.S. Marine to die on a U.S. road than you are to die in Iraq."

"You're U.S. Marines. You stand for what's right in this world. If a Marine dies on a U.S. road because of a bad choice, there's no purpose or honor in that at all."

Narowski, 25 at the time of her crash, was a personal trainer with a blossoming career.

"No seatbelt. Unfamiliar vehicle. Had had two drinks. All those bad decisions in one afternoon."

"We hit the guardrail, and I flew into the steering wheel. My body flew around like a ragdoll. My vertebra exploded like a grenade. My spine stretched like taffy."

"A split second decision can have enormous consequences."

She awoke hours later on a hard, unfamiliar hospital bed.

"I tried to move, but I couldn't move. I said, 'I can't move my legs.' I said it again. 'I can't move my legs.'"

Nurses ignored her. They were busy and already knew the truth that Narowski hadn't yet grasped.

She was paralyzed from the middle of her back, down.

"Your ability to walk is something you never think you're going to lose. I

never did. I felt invincible."

Narowski sustained enough damage to her spinal cord that the broken bones, bruises and concussions seemed like child's play.

"If you get a brain or spinal cord injury, doctors can't fix it," she said.

After seemingly endless days of operations and physical therapy, she left the hospital with two back fusions and two titanium rods holding everything together. She continued to keep getting sick even after that.

The journey to regaining her life had just begun. She needed to get back to some semblance of normalcy. But the crash had made that near impossible.

"The first year or two was living hell. That is not something I want to happen to any of you," she said.

"It wears on you emotionally. The first thing they see is a wheelchair, not a person. I just wanted to be treated like Kelly."

"I'm trapped in a body that's just unresponsive. It's not a lifestyle I recommend. It's much better to have the ability to walk, the ability to feel."

Everything from going to a restaurant with family to spending time out with friends had to be

planned meticulously.

"If there's not a ramp, you're not going," she said.

Bladder control is another issue many adults take for granted.

"Nothing is more degrading than being at the mall with your friends and suddenly, there's pee everywhere. And you think, 'Wow, I did this to myself.'"

Even after all of that, Narowski's life made a turn for the better, she's back on track and she's grateful at least her choice to drive while intoxicated didn't cost anyone their lives.

"I know how hard it is to live as a paraplegic. I think it'd be 100 times harder to wake up, look in the mirror and know I murdered someone."

Now, she's married to a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, has a close-knit group of friends and an amazing support network. She spends her days doing something she is passionate about — helping people make the right choices behind the wheel.

Narowski doesn't want or need pity.

"I make it a personal policy not to complain about the spinal cord. It doesn't change anything and nobody wants to hear it. I'm not telling you this so you think, 'Oh that poor lady. She's been through a lot.' I want your thoughts to be, 'I don't want any part of any of that,'" she said.

"There're two types of people in this world. Those who get it, and those who don't."

"I had to learn the hard way."

"Nothing is more degrading than being at the mall with your friends and suddenly, there's pee everywhere. And you think, 'Wow, I did this to myself.'"

— Kelly Narowski



CPL. ANDREW D. THORBURN

Kelly Narowski, a motivational speaker who travels the country talking to young adults about the dangers of drinking and driving, tells Combat Center Marines about how drunk driving took away the use of her legs.

Did you know?

The Liberty Call page on B2 now has Combat Center club information

Excursions Enlisted Club

Bloodstripes NCO Club

Hashmarks 29 SNCO Club

Combat Center's Officers' Club