



## Army wife finds her niche through life-altering injury



Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Pete Mayes

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by Sgt. 1st Class Pete Mayes, 101st Sustainment Brigade

It all started 11 years ago, on September 27, 1998 ... that's a date Kelly Narawski will forever have etched in her memory.

Back then, she was 25-years-old, three months into her exciting new life in California, a career as a personal trainer, and a great boyfriend. An automobile accident involving her and a friend as she was driving home left her paralyzed from the chest down and changed everything.

Now age 36, Narawski, has since created a new life for herself, one that involves sharing her story with anyone who will listen, about practicing safety behind the wheel. She also views her injury differently.

"I don't see it as a depressing thing anymore. Now I just see it as a huge inconvenience in my life," she said. "I don't concentrate on it because it's negative, and negative energy won't change it."

The wife of an Army lieutenant colonel stationed at Fort Lee, Va., Nawarski recently visited Fort Campbell and shared her story with Soldiers of the 101st Sustainment Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, during a recent brigade-level "Safety Standown."

She began sharing her experiences four years ago by working with a non-profit organization, "Think First," a Chicago-based group comprised of neuro-surgeons who have treated victims of Spinal Cord and Traumatic Brain Injuries. She first began speaking at various schools, and eventually began talking to Soldiers while she and her husband were stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Her message is simple: take responsibility for your life and make your personal safety a priority. Not doing it, she said, can turn a car into "a two-ton killing machine."

Nawarski's presentation is not standard by any means: she wheels around the floor talking to the Soldiers, offering a mini biology class on the functions of the brain and spine using replicas, and shows how they are impacted after sustaining a traumatic injury.

She also includes several short video presentations, including a traffic accident involving a baby. The images had a definite impact on several Soldiers, who bristled in their chairs and shook their heads in disbelief as images of the infant being strapped onto a gurney, eyes wide open, flashed across the screen.

Nawarski also touched on other traffic accident factors such as fatigue, cell phone use and texting while driving. Nothing is left untouched and there's no beating around the bush in her message. "You gotta tell it like it is," she said. "To sugar-coat it would not be getting the true message across. Some people are harder to reach than others, and so you need to tell it like it is."

Finally, she shares her own story.

Nawarski's friend drank too much that afternoon when she got behind the wheel of her Jeep Wrangler. She realized they'd be better off letting Kelly drive, who had only "had a couple of drinks and was slightly buzzed," she said.

By her own admission, the two drinks had "impaired her judgment." Nawarski was not wearing a seat belt when she took a curve too quickly and ended up smashing the jeep into a guardrail. She was thrown from the vehicle and suffered numerous injuries, including broken ribs, collarbone, back, and a spinal injury.

She described the first year adjusting to life in a wheelchair as "extremely difficult."

"I didn't want to live like this, and then you realize you have two choices: you can either get on with life or lay in bed for the next 50 or 60 years," Nawarski said.

Getting on with life meant relearning how to take care of herself. She learned to put her pants on without bending her legs, how to eat properly, and how to get around. The journey has paid off: she's since learned to drive a car, has gone skydiving, and even took a trip overseas by herself.

She said she often wonders whether or not her message has reached her audience. A Soldier walked up to her after her presentation and thanked her. That's when she knows she's made a difference, she said.

"That makes me feel good, like they got something out of it," she said. "They were reminded of how important a smart decision on the road is."