



Narowski, victim of paralyzing car crash, speaks to Marines, sailors

Photo by Cpl. Jonathan G. Wright

Kelly Narowski speaks to Marines and sailors about her experiences as well as those of others in the Tinian Room of Marston Pavilion aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, July 27. Narowski stressed the importance of making smart decisions in the vehicle and not to let the split-second decisions that can drastically alter one's life be made hastily.

CPL. JONATHAN G. WRIGHT

Marine Corps Base
Camp Lejeune

For a good decade following the latter part of the 70s, the name of Christopher Reeve was of household recognition to both adventurous children and adults alike. Portraying the fictional hero Superman in four feature films, Reeve was the epitome of the indestructible on the silver screen, able to withstand the most heinous physical attacks unscathed.

Yet on May 27, 1995, during an equestrian competition, Reeve was thrown from his horse when it suddenly stopped before a jump, sending Reeve flying to the ground and landing on his head, crushing the first and second vertebrae of his spine. Reeve became a quadriplegic, unable to move any part of his body, confined to a wheelchair and aided in breathing by a tube affixed through his throat.

"I remember seeing him on Oprah's show, and I thought, 'Wow, that

would suck,'" said Kelly Narowski with a grin of irony. "A couple months later I found out what it was really like."

In the Tinian Room of Marston Pavilion aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune before approximately 400 Marines and sailors, Narowski spoke about a topic that concerns virtually every individual aboard base: driving safely. What qualifies Narowski to speak about the dangers of careless driving is how she conducts her presentation, for she does not do it from behind a podium, but in a wheelchair – the one she was confined to – years ago.

Experiencing a near-fatal vehicle crash that left her paralyzed from the chest down, Narowski's life from then on has been one of survival and education, speaking since 2000 at various organizations and military bases across the country about the dangers and effects of vehicle collisions.

"What I want to get all of you to do is prioritize your personal safety," said Narowski to the Marines and sailors around her. "It's about the small,

split-second decisions that can have severe, life-altering results. I spent the first 25 years of my life walking and running around, but due to a stupid choice, I'm going to be using this wheelchair for the rest of my life."

However, telling her own story to those in front of her was not her job that day. As she puts it, she only touches on her personal experiences for approximately 15 minutes. The rest of the time is spent by using both visual aids and disturbing statistics in an effort to better inform those in attendance about the consequences of distracted driving.

"We are always looking to find new, innovative ways to push messages out to the Marines," said Sgt. Maj. Robert VanOostrom, sergeant major of Marine Corps Installations East. "This past weekend (July 23 and 24), two Marines were lost to motorcycle accidents in the Eastern Carolina area. We expect you to make instantaneous decisions on the battlefield, but sometimes the wrong decisions are made back home."

VanOostrom added that individuals are more

likely to pay attention to certain command safety messages when the subject matter is relatable to someone's own life. This is why, as opposed to the generic safety brief, Narowski, an individual who made a bad choice, sits before the audience to better relate to the Marines and sailors and have them recognize the importance of safety assurance while in a vehicle.

"I received five speeding tickets while I was in college, but I just didn't 'get it,'" said Narowski. "Unfortunately, I 'got it' a few years later when I drove 70 miles an hour without a seatbelt on."

Alcohol and other personal distracters impair one's judgment for just enough amount of time to cause life-threatening consequences. On their way to a jazz festival on the beach, Narowski stopped to pick up her friend Heather at her house. However, before leaving, the two had some alcohol. Heather drove part of the way, but had to pull over after feeling the effects of the six to eight martinis she had.

SEE NAROWSKI 2C ▶



Photo by Cpl. Jonalhan G. Wright

Kelly Narowski, a paraplegic due to a debilitating vehicle wreck, speaks to Marines and sailors about her experiences as well as those of others in the Tinian Room of Marston Pavilion aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, July 27.

NAROWSKI FROM 1C

Narowski and Heather changed seats, and with Narowski behind the steering wheel, the excitement of the party and the alcohol made her forget to put her seatbelt on.

"I hopped out of the passenger's side, ran around the front to the driver's side and got in," said Narowski. "That's the last time I ever walked again."

After taking a curve too quickly, Narowski overcompensated when trying to get back on the road and ran into the guardrail. Her body was thrown into the steering wheel at 70 miles an hour, breaking her ribs and collarbone, collapsing one lung and filling both with blood. Her body was then tossed into the backseat after being bounced around the inside of the cab, stretching her spine like a piece of taffy and obliterating her T6 vertebrae, instantly paralyzing her from the chest down.

"Among the many other surgeries I underwent, I had two spinal fusions where my hips were ground down and titanium rods were inserted into my spine, and six bronchoscopes where my lungs were cleaned out," said Narowski. "I'm not telling you all this for sympathy, but so you realize what could happen to you if you make a bad, split-second decision."

Narowski also educated the Marines and sailors on some harrowing statistics, such as how the leading cause of death for people

less than 33 years of age is brain damage, how 1.5 million Americans sustain a brain injury per year, and how 30 people will become paralyzed due to a spinal cord injury in the U.S. per day.

The causes of such vehicle accidents were also covered, telling how the number one reason for car crashes are not due to alcohol, but simple distracted driving, such as attention to a cell phone or food. Making calls on a cell phone increases one's chances of crashing by four times, an act that is now illegal in 10 states and aboard all military posts. Texting is now illegal in 34 states and also increases the chances of crashing.

"I can tell you thousands of stories like mine, but what are you supposed to learn from all this?" asked Narowski. "Simply to pay attention and make smart choices. You're in a 2,000 pound vehicle going 70 miles down the road. What sense does it make to be texting? Just make smart decisions and realize that what happened to me could happen to you."

Safety, especially that of vehicular safety, is paramount aboard MCB Camp Lejeune as well as the other Marine Corps installations around the globe. Responsibility in safety can be pushed and taught in countless safety briefs and stand-downs, but the start of safety begins with the individual behind the wheel and the choices he or she has made up to that point.