



Small Decisions Crucial for Drivers

Posted: Thursday, June 23, 2011 12:00 am

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FORT LEE, Va. (June 23, 2011) -- "Small, split-second decisions can have enormous consequences," Kelly G. Narowski, a safe driving speaker, told members of the Petroleum and Water Department Tuesday during one of her nine presentations at Fort Lee this week. Installation and CASCOM Safety Offices sponsored the post-wide training, "Drive to Stay Alive."

An Army spouse and government contractor, Narowski also spoke at Fort Lee last spring. She serves on the Fayetteville, N.C., Council for Persons with Disabilities and is a member of the National Spinal Cord Injury Association. Narowski is also a Family Readiness Group adviser at Fort Bragg.

A paraplegic for the last 12 years because of small, unfortunate decisions she made, Narowski is intent on driving home to Soldiers the fragility of their brains and spinal cords: "Think first - use your mind to protect them!"

There was one teenager in the audience Tuesday - 16-year-old Zachary Reese, an intern in the Safety Office who is on the verge of getting his driver's license. His first thought as Narowski's program unfolded was, "I'm never going to drive again," he said later. As she continued to speak, Reese realized that all the "stupid mistakes (he watched people make in the videos) are easily avoidable."

In the U.S., there are 1.5 million traumatic brain injuries a year. TBIs are the No. 1 cause of death in people under age 33, said Narowski, noting that 30 Americans a day suffer a spinal cord injury. Car crashes claimed 36,000 lives in America last year, she said, noting the number is down from 2009 because more states have primary seatbelt laws and tougher laws against driving under the influence. The sour economy also has people choosing to drive less, she added.

Narowski doesn't use the word "accidents" when she talks about wrecks. Car crashes happen because of choices, she said, noting that "99.999 percent of fatalities are due to human error. Life is about choices - personal choices, personal responsibilities." She rolled off an impressive list of celebrities from singer Lisa Lopes to Princess Diana who died because they chose not to wear seat belts.

"As a Soldier," she told the PWD Soldiers and civilians, "you're more likely to die on a U.S. highway than in Iraq." One of the video clips Narowski showed features a young Soldier reminiscing about a dead battle buddy. "It's stupid to lose a buddy over (a seat belt)," he said in the video.

Clicking that seatbelt into place is important to Narowski because that's what she failed to do when she took the wheel from a friend who decided she was too drunk to drive. However, the absence of seat belts isn't the only driving hazard.

"The most commonly committed violent crime in America is drunk driving," said Narowski. "A third of driving deaths result from drunk driving." She reminded the Soldiers that there is "almost always someone you can call in your chain of command" when they've had too much to drink to drive safely.

Citing the death of Angels pitcher Nick Adenhardt and three of his friends whose vehicle was hit by a drunk driver, Narowski said that driver is now serving a 54-year prison sentence.

More burdensome than a prison sentence for her, she said, would be the guilt of killing another person while drunk. "Can you imagine having to live with that?" she asked her audience.

Inattention is another serious driver choice, according to Narowski. "Take driving seriously," she urged her audience. Talking on a hand-held cell phone makes a driver four times more likely to be in a car crash. Talking on a hands-free device cuts that risk in half. "Texting and driving - crazy! That's an enormous distraction," and it's now illegal in 34 states, Narowski said.

Although she got five speeding tickets as a college student, it took a major crash for Narowski to understand that "traffic laws are there for a reason. Not getting it ended up costing me my legs a couple of years later." She noted a great deal of science is used in setting traffic laws.

For the few motorcyclists in the audience, Narowski ran through a few reminders - wear an approved helmet as well as durable clothes and gloves, take the class and don't speed - before moving on to drowsy driving. Lack of adequate sleep is another driving hazard, she said.

Last year Narowski visited a young corporal at Fort Sam Houston in Texas whose Army career is over because she'd been a patient with a minor complaint in an ambulance whose driver fell asleep at the wheel.

Narowski saves her personal story for the end of her presentation. After earning a degree in physiology, she moved to Santa Barbara, Calif., to work as a personal trainer and waitress. Heading to a concert one night, her friend declared herself too drunk to drive and asked Kelly to take the wheel. Narowski had had two martinis to her friend's eight or more so she thought she was OK. "I was buzzed, but I ran to the driver's seat. That was the last time I walked," she said, because she did not fasten her seatbelt.

She was driving an unfamiliar vehicle on a curvy mountain road at night. She was "buzzed" and in a deep conversation with her friend. The car hit a guard rail. Narowski hit the steering wheel.

Her body then flew around the inside of the vehicle and landed in the back seat. She was left with an exploded thoracic vertebra. Her drunk friend? She did click her seatbelt and walked away without a scratch.

"I understand very well what you can do to yourself in a car, and I don't want you to go through it," she told her audience. "I did this to myself." Along with the use of her legs, said Narowski, she lost bowel and bladder control and has osteoporosis in the bones in her lower body.

Addressing the Soldiers, Narowski said, "You are willing to put your life on the line (in military service) for 310 million people you don't even know. There are two kinds of people: those who get (driving safety) and those who don't. Be one who gets it."