

graduation 1994

Accident victim battles against drunk driving

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

NEWARK — When he was 18 years old, Michael Sheehe felt as so many teenagers do about death.

"I had feelings of immortality," he said. "I never thought I would be the one who was going to get killed."

On the night of April 16, 1966, Sheehe discovered how

which, in another twist of fate, is housed in a building constructed at the site where his accident took place — and a member of the Rochester Wheels wheelchair basketball team.

In his job and through his involvement with the basketball team, Sheehe travels around to various organizations — including a number of schools — to talk about his accident and battle with addiction, and the



Sheehe, a member of the Rochester Wheels wheelchair basketball team, played a demonstration game with Durand-Eastman School students.

mortal he was.

He had spent the evening in Lyons, helping a friend work on a car. A parishioner at St. Michael's Parish in Newark, Sheehe was attending a machine school with hopes of being a tool and die maker.

At the end of the evening, Sheehe grew impatient while waiting for a friend to come get him, so he decided to hitchhike from Lyons to Newark. A driver soon picked him up.

He immediately realized that the driver was intoxicated. As the driver began speeding, Sheehe asked him to slow down, then pleaded with the man to let him out of the car.

"He got off on the fact that I was scared, so he went faster," he recalled.

The car went off the road. Sheehe was dragged, then pinned under the car. Ironically, the friend who was supposed to pick him up was the first person to stop at the wreck to help. The second person on the scene was Sheehe's own brother, who was driving home from Lyons after work.

"If I had waited, I would have been all right," he speculated.

As a result of the accident, Sheehe had to have both legs amputated after gangrene developed. He also became addicted to Demerol, the pain killer given to him in the hospital. It was almost a year after the accident before Sheehe had recovered enough to get on with his life — facing it now from a wheelchair, another victim of a drunk driver.

But Sheehe has put his accident, his addiction and his disability to good use. He is the coordinator of education for Stop DWI in Wayne County —

dangers of drinking and driving. These talks and exhibition basketball games also help raise funds for the team and for such groups as Students Against Drinking and Driving.

Among the schools at which he has spoken is Irondequoit's Bishop Kearney High School, where he addressed seniors in mid-April.

Sheehe said he and other Rochester Wheels members go about giving testimonies to groups and putting on exhibitions in part because so many of them were disabled as a result of alcohol-related accidents.

"We did a survey," Sheehe explained. "About one third of the members were disabled through alcohol-related accidents — some through their own negligence, some through others."

Sheehe's own experience showed him the dangers of alcohol and driving — not only for the drinkers, but also for those who ride with them, and innocent victims who had no previous contact with the drivers until the accident.

In addition, through his battle with the pain killers doctors were giving him, Sheehe discovered how powerful addiction can be — whether to alcohol or to any other drug.

"At 18, I didn't think anything in my life could have absolute control of me," Sheehe said. "I was totally and absolutely certain."

When he and his team members tell their stories and warn students about the potential dangers of drinking and driving, their words can be heard loud and clear, Sheehe said. "You can hear a pin drop. (The students) appreciate the person-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Michael Sheehe, coordinator of education for Stop DWI in Wayne County and a parishioner at St. Michael's Church in Newark, spoke May 27 at Irondequoit's Durand-Eastman Intermediate School about the dangers of drinking and driving.

al sharing."

And the message apparently gets through to many students.

"After somebody does a testimony on alcohol and driving, when (the students) see the wheelchairs, there's a subliminal message of the risks that can happen to anyone," he

said. "There's a ripple effect."

Some students get warned about the dangers before they start, Sheehe said. Some have begun to drink, but begin to think twice after he speaks. And some of those who already have a problem often deny or reject what he says. "But you plant a seed that makes them

get intervention down the road," he said.

Indeed, Sheehe likened his efforts and those of his fellow Rochester Wheels team members to the work of good farmers.

"We plant the seeds and watch them grow," Sheehe concluded.

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