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## Paralympian offers tale of distracted driving

October 23, 2014

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WEIRTON - Stephani Victor, Paralympian and Chaffin Luhana Foundation spokesperson, and Eric Chaffin, Chaffin Luhana partner, spoke about distracted driving to Weir High School's juniors and seniors Wednesday as part of the foundation's DRAW Challenge to end distracted driving.

Victor medaled five times in Alpine skiing, taking the sport up after losing both legs in an accident involving a distracted driver when she was 26. In 1995, she was standing in a friend's driveway, loading the trunk of his car before going to dinner, when a distracted driver jumped the curb, struck her and pinned her between the two cars before dragging her 15 feet.

"It looked like I had stepped on a landmine," she said of the injuries to her legs, both above and below the knees. "The muscle memory, I played soccer - who here has played sports? Well, when you get knocked down, you jump right back up. One of my feet was up by my ear. I looked and realized I wasn't getting back up."

It took six paramedics to get Victor into the ambulance.

"I didn't want to die," she said. "I asked one of the paramedics if he would hold my hand. I felt his wedding ring and I asked him how long he had been married. I knew I wanted that - I wanted to get married and have a family."

Victor underwent surgery and was placed in an intensive care unit.

"When I woke back up in ICU, it was my mother who told me," she said. "I woke up and she was there. I asked her, 'are my legs gone?' And she said, 'yes, baby, they are.'"

The driver who struck her was 17 years old and had had his license for 10 days. He wasn't speeding, but was going two miles under the speed limit when he attempted to change a CD, jumped the curb and struck Victor. Over the next three years, Victor would have a total of 14 reconstructive surgeries.

"In the dark hours of the night in the hospital, things get real," she said.

Victor came to the realization that the driver who had hit her had not left his home meaning to harm anyone and would likely have done things differently if he realized his moment of inattention would hurt someone. She resolved to educate others and raise awareness about distracted driving.

When she decided to take up skiing, she met Marcel Kunonen, Park City paralympic skiing coach.

"One of the first things he told me was 'there is no such thing as disabled skiing,'" she said. "It gave me freedom. On the mountain, I wasn't thinking about my wheelchair, I was thinking about going fast, the wind on my face and executing the perfect turn."

Kunonen suggested she train for the 2006 Paralympics in Italy, where she won the slalom and placed fourth in two other events. In the 2010 Vancouver Paralympics, she won a gold medal and two silvers. At 40, she qualified for Team USA and participated in the 2014 Paralympics in Sochi.

"I'm just a human being willing to take chances and who dared to dream," she said. "We are here a very short time, so don't waste a second of it."

Victor and Kunonen married, and while she would love to be able to run and dance again, she wouldn't take her legs back if it meant

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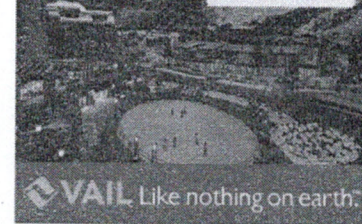
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losing the lessons she learned through the experience and the relationship with her husband.

Chaffin spoke about empowering the students to discuss distracted driving with their friends and loved ones and the tools to end their own distracted driving and encourage others to stop as well. Distracted driving is a nation-wide - and international - crisis affecting people of all ages, he said.

"To be honest, it's not just a teen issue," Chaffin said. "It's also an adults issue, and I think that adults are in denial."

Distracted driving affects drivers three ways: visually, manually and cognitively. There are many ways drivers can be distracted, from speaking on a cell phone to eating. A car traveling 50 miles per hour travels the length of a football field in four seconds.

"You wouldn't drive with a blindfold, but that's basically what you are - blindfolded," said Chaffin. "Your eyes are not on the road."

Those who text and drive are 23 times more likely to be in an accident and those who take and receive calls while driving are four times more likely to be in an accident.

"That's the same as drunk driving," said Chaffin. "It's important to understand there are real-world consequences."

Approximately 3,000 people are killed by distracted drivers and thousands more are injured each year.

Chaffin, an Oak Glen High School graduate now working as an attorney in New York, admitted he drove distracted until his children, aged 9 and 12, told him it made them uncomfortable.

"I realized I wasn't being a good role model for them," he said.

The foundation's mission to end distracted driving began after college student Casey Feldman was killed while crossing the street in a cross walk in 2009. She was the daughter of Chaffin's friend Joel Feldman.

"In just a few seconds, whole lives can be changed," said Chaffin.

Principal Dan Enich noted distracted driving is an issue that concerns high school administrators across the country each year.

"You fall in that demographic," he told the juniors and seniors.

"That's why we have seminars, guest speakers and Officer (Steve) DiBacco coming in and giving you tips, hints and information that will make you better drivers."

Pledges to refrain from distracted driving were distributed to the students. Chaffin announced that those who submitted their signed pledges to DiBacco the quickest would receive a gift certificate. Students also were encouraged to make video public service announcements of 90 seconds or less discouraging distracted drivers. The student creating the best PSA in the national contest will receive a scholarship and be invited to ski with Victor at Utah's Deer Valley ski resort.

Find information on the EndDD pledge and scholarship competition on the website at [www.chaffinluhanafoundation.org](http://www.chaffinluhanafoundation.org). For information on Victor and the upcoming documentary on her journey, visit her website at [www.stephanivictor.com](http://www.stephanivictor.com).

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