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Man on a mission: Survivor of DWI crash has sobering message

By Evelyn Apgar

In representing an injured auto accident victim, there probably are few lawyers who can bring to the table the perspective of Teaneck attorney Steven Benvenisti.

When he counsels a personal injury client, he's speaking from excruciatingly painful experience.

Eleven years ago, doctors were so convinced Benvenisti would die after suffering massive injuries in a horrific car accident in Florida, they asked his parents if they could harvest his organs for donation.

He fooled them and a lot of others who thought he was a goner.

Indeed, those same physicians and nurses were flabbergasted several years later to see Benvenisti return to Daytona Beach, walking on legs once threatened with amputation and dedicating his life to helping accident victims receive justice.

The attorney at Davis Saperstein & Salomon includes in his busy litigation schedule as many as two or three speaking engagements a week at high schools, community organizations and houses of worship. He focuses on the havoc caused by drunken drivers.

Benvenisti, who never accepts honoraria, said his reward comes when students promise they won't drive and drink.

Right from the start of his presentation, Benvenisti engages his audience.

He tells his listeners about an unnamed 21-year-old college student, fraternity vice president and homecoming king, six weeks away from graduating with honors from Trenton State College and enjoying the sun and fun in Daytona Beach.

The student, who had not been drinking, was walking from a restaurant to his hotel when his life changed forever.

He was struck by a car driven by another young man who'd been drinking and was driving 50 mph in the wrong direction.

The homecoming king's torso was smashed against the oncoming car, shattering both his legs, and his face went through the window. He was thrown 70 feet and bounced into the street, landing facedown.

As his audience gasps, Benvenisti flips over some large posters to reveal photos of a young man connected to a respirator, one leg ripped open and a maze of intravenous tubes attached to his motionless body.

"I am that student. This is me 10 years ago," Benvenisti says.

His audience usually is hooked on his dramatic message.

Benvenisti says it's not uncommon for listeners to come up to him or write letters, promising not to drive while drinking — ever.

With prom time approaching, he schedules several 40-minute presentations a week to save others from sharing the pain that shot through his body during 15 surgeries and months of intensive rehabilitation.

He was in a coma for 10 days and his family was afraid they'd lost him twice, including immediately after the crash, when he was wracked with several pulmonary emboli.

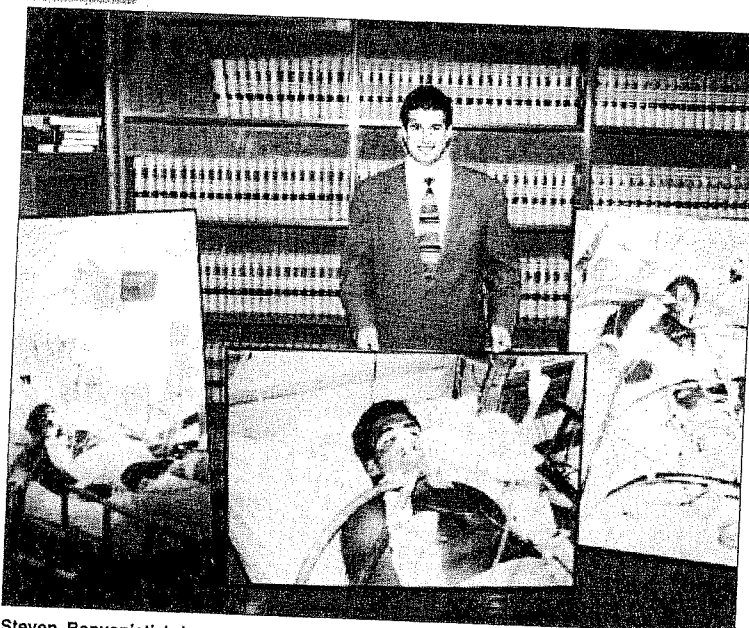
Besides the memories arising each time he tells his tale, Benvenisti's only major remaining problem is pain when he runs, especially in the leg with a steel rod and four pins in it.

He tells his listeners that DWI fatalities are the leading cause of death among high school students.

It's a statistic school officials want Benvenisti to emphasize — and he readily does.

He admits his advocacy efforts against DWI have taken on a life of their own. Following work with Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Benvenisti became the leading speaker in End DWI, which also fosters programs against drinking and driving.

After his recuperation, Benvenisti graduated from college *magna cum laude* and enrolled at Quinnipiac Law School in Connecticut. He has been a lawyer since 1993. Before joining Davis Saperstein, he clerked for Bergen County Judge Eugene H. Austin.



Steven Benvenisti brings these poster-sized photos of himself whenever he speaks to groups about the dangers of drunken driving.