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Help Find Cure - In A Fun Way

BY DENIS HAMILL

Wednesday, June 02, 2004

Around 3 a.m. on Oct. 30 last year, Alex Elegudin, 20, stopped for gas on the Pennsylvania Turnpike about 30 miles outside of Pittsburgh in his 1999 Acura after driving for 6 1/2 hours on the seven-hour, 400-mile trip from Manhattan Beach.

Elegudin was driving back to Carnegie Mellon University, where he was a sophomore majoring in biomedical engineering, after a midsemester break.

Two years earlier, he graduated from Brooklyn Tech High School, where he quarterbacked the football team to the playoffs every year.

At Carnegie Mellon, he was a running back for the school's football team.

Tired, Elegudin gave the wheel to one of the three schoolmates he was driving back to school, and he strapped himself into the front passenger seat.

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Minutes later, they saw a disabled car on the side of the road. The driver of Elegudin's car did not see the dead deer in the middle of the road that the other car had hit. Elegudin's schoolmate ran over the dead deer, and it ripped a wheel off the Acura. The car careened out of control and flipped off the highway and down a small hill.

"I lost consciousness," Elegudin says now. "When I woke up, I was hanging upside down, waiting for the police and ambulance. I couldn't feel my legs. Couldn't feel my arms. . . ."

A helicopter delivered him to Mercy Medical Center, where the next morning Elegudin was diagnosed with C-5 and C-6 tetraplegia, which means that he had use of his wrists but not his arms or legs.

"I spent three weeks in ICU," he says. "I've had five surgeries. But it didn't really sink in that this was now my life until I got back to New York and went to Mount Sinai for therapy, and I met all the other people in wheelchairs, who were very depressed.

"I learned that only about 11% of people like me ever have a full recovery. See, a regular bone breaks and it heals and everything's fine. A spinal cord doesn't work like that. But there is amazing research going on, especially by a great doctor named Dr. Wise Young in New Jersey. So I believe there will be a cure."

So do the 300 people in wheelchairs who will be at the Rally for the Cure at the Winter Garden in the World Financial Center on West St. between Liberty and Vesey Sts. on Sunday from 5:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.

Michael Badalucco, an actor from "The Practice" whose heart is as big as his talent, will emcee this vital fund-raiser for spinal cord injury research. Christopher Reeve will be honored there as a Hero of Hope.

Tickets - which include dinner, drinks, a performance by Cirque du Soleil and raffles for a Caribbean vacation, a kayaking vacation in the country and tickets to the Indianapolis 500 - are \$500.

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Hey, spinal cord research isn't cheap. We're talking about putting vital human beings back on their feet here. But there are ways to get discount or complimentary tickets if you sell raffles, set up fund-raisers in your community, or collect pledges. Call the number below for that information.

Meanwhile, these days Alex Elegudin goes to physical therapy six times a week at Mount Sinai and the Kessler Rehabilitation Institute in New Jersey, using a sliding board to get in and out of his parents' van. Just as he once led his team to victory on a gridiron, Elegudin has pitch-perfect command of his life.

"Hey, if you're not laughing, you're crying. I refuse to feel sorry for myself," he said. "My parents didn't deserve this. They've been through hell. They are simply wonderful to me - strong, supportive, always there. So my job is to be strong and optimistic for them. My best friend, Elaina Royton, who has been my pal since first grade, spends a lot of time hanging with me. I had a girlfriend before I got hurt, but that's over. Now I'm ready to go back to school and get on with my life and work for a cure."

Elegudin says some of the things that are most bothersome are things like hygiene, bedsores and the inability to do some basic things for himself. But he refuses to be a shut-in or a mope. The other day as he spoke he waited for a flight from JFK to Aruba, his first vacation since his injury. And he's applying to Columbia and NYU.

"I hope people come to the event to help us find a cure," he says. "And just to have some fun."

For information, call (732) 445-6573. You can send donations to: Rally for the Cure, 604 Allison Road, D 251, Piscataway, N.J. 08854.

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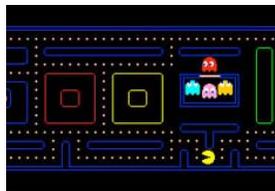
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