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## **Organization tries to prevent brain, spine injuries**

### **Naperville group founded in 1986**

By Gary Gibula, Special to the Tribune

5:08 PM CDT, July 10, 2013

Even though it's encased inside the skull, many people do not realize the human brain is a delicate organ susceptible to injuries that can leave a person mentally or physically disabled, or both.

Since 1986, a worldwide nonprofit organization based in Naperville has undertaken to inform the public that injuries like concussions and spine compressions can be avoided if adults and children make the right choices and take precautions.

"The No. 1 cause of death and disability to young adults and children is not cancer or heart disease," said Debby Gerhardstein, executive director of the ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation. "It's traumatic injury from car crashes, violence or other accidents."

According to ThinkFirst, each year 1.7 million people in the country sustain a brain injury, and up to 20,000 suffer spinal cord injuries. Gerhardstein said her organization helps remind the public that most injuries are preventable.

"Distracted driving has been in the news lately," Gerhardstein said. "It can be dangerous using a cellphone in any way while driving." Other concerns, she said, include blood-alcohol content for those who drive.

"We believe you should not drive a vehicle or even be a passenger of someone who's had any amount of alcohol," Gerhardstein said.

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ThinkFirst also advocates the wearing of helmets on bicycles or motorcycles, no matter a person's age.

"Actually, there are more bicycle head injuries to adults than to kids each year," Gerhardstein said.

Since last year, the nonprofit has partnered with Schwinn to create the Helmets on Heads program to educate children about the importance of wearing a helmet while bicycling. The company donates new bike helmets to organizations or schools upon request.

"It is about awareness, education and motivating people to act so that they enjoy many years of safe and fun bike riding," said Alice Tillett, president of Schwinn. "As we kick off the second year of Helmets on Heads, our mission remains the same. We want children and kids to wear a properly fitting helmet and be safe each time they ride their bikes."

ThinkFirst originally was known as the National Head and Spinal Cord Injury Prevention Program, founded by two neurosurgery organizations. Since its inception, the nonprofit has chartered more than 159 chapters around the United States and 39 units in foreign countries ranging from Canada to New Zealand.

ThinkFirst provides groups and schools free educational materials and presentations that include a guest speaker who actually experienced a brain or spinal cord injury.

"He'll tell the kids, 'I was your age, I never thought this would happen to me either, and this is what happened that day,'" Gerhardstein said. "He'll explain the science that the brain and spine are made out of tissue."

One of the messages to children is about playground safety, like never going down a slide backward. Others concern water safety.

"It's so easy to hurt your spine when you dive, or even just jump, into shallow water," Gerhardstein said. "Flotation devices and properly fitted life preservers are important. Drinking when you're behind the wheel of a boat also is a big issue."

Gerhardstein said it's vital for parents to help children understand that they're in charge of their bodies.

"For adults, it's really important that we not only lead by example but also protect ourselves as well so we're here to take care the kids," she said.

For more information, see <http://www.thinkfirst.org>.