



Russ Burris, ThinkFirst 2019 VIP of the Year

Russ Burris was only 90 seconds from home when a tragic mistake changed his life forever.

It was June 3, 1990. Burris, then 18, had dropped off his girlfriend at her house and was driving home just after midnight when he fell asleep at the wheel. He was too tired to be safely driving but thought he could make it home.

“The last thing I remember is stepping off her porch. When I woke up, I was staring at a ceiling in a hospital,” says Burris who lives in Columbia, Missouri.

The crash left Burris with a life-changing spinal cord injury, paralyzed from the mid-chest down, but it didn’t damage his spirit or positive outlook on life. He went from the hospital to rehabilitation, learning to use a wheelchair and a car, despite the paralysis in his legs.

Burris decided to take his experience and turn it into a powerful lesson that others could learn from. He became a VIP Speaker – Voice for Injury Prevention-- for ThinkFirst Missouri, a chapter of the ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation, an organization dedicated to preventing brain, spinal cord and other traumatic injuries through education, research and advocacy.

Burris, now 47, has been sharing his story for 25 years. This past April, Burris was named the ThinkFirst 2019 VIP Speaker of the Year at the annual ThinkFirst Conference on Injury Prevention, held in San Diego.

“His passion is obvious,” says Michelle Gibler, PhD, Director of ThinkFirst Missouri, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO. “People in the audience can feel it. It’s pure and his message never seems practiced or rehearsed because it comes from the heart.”

Burris is one of more than 200 VIP Speakers who work with ThinkFirst chapters nationwide to teach teens about drowsy driving and other dangers that can lead to crashes, injuries or death. Often, Burris finds teens are like he was when he was 18 –unaware of the life-altering risk and potential harm of driving on too little sleep.

“I’d been up for 36 hours before I fell asleep at the wheel” says Burris. “Any kind of actual sleep? No. I hadn’t gotten any.”

He learned only later what happened when he fell asleep.

“I crossed the center line, was hit by another driver, and hit an embankment,” he says. “I was ejected through the sun roof and landed on the shoulder of the road.”

Suffering a fractured spine, pelvis, ribs and collarbone, Burris spent four weeks in intensive care. It was a nurse who told him about the long-term impacts of his injuries.

“It’s not easy to have a stranger tell you that you broke your back and you’re never going to walk again,” he says.

As close as he was to home, Burris was not safe from the dangers of sleep deprivation. In fact, he says that is a time that is especially dangerous for drowsy drivers.

“When people are getting close to home they think they can power through,” he says. “They are less likely to stop.”

Burris is one of far too many who have driven while drowsy. The statistics are staggering.

The American Sleep Foundation estimates that nearly half of U.S. adult drivers consistently admit to getting behind the wheel while feeling drowsy. Roughly 20% admit to falling asleep behind the wheel at some point in the past year, with more than 40% admitting this has happened at least once during their driving years.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that every year about 100,000 police-reported crashes involve drowsy driving. More than 1,550 fatalities and 71,000 injuries are attributed to these crashes.

Individuals under 25 make up an estimated 50% or more of drowsy driving crashes, which is one reason why Burris and ThinkFirst often direct their traffic safety message to teens and young adults.

One way to avoid a drowsy driving crash is to recognize the signs that you are too tired to drive. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine offers some signs to be on the lookout for:

- Frequent yawning or difficulty keeping your eyes open
- Nodding off or having difficulty keeping your head up
- Inability to remember driving the last few miles
- Missing road signs or turns
- Drifting out of your lane
- Difficulty maintaining your speed

Fortunately, Burris, who now works as a transportation coordinator for the ambulance service at University Hospital in Columbia, Missouri, was able to return to driving. But he has changed the way in which he drives.

“When I start feeling tired, I look for a place to pull off,” says Burris.

Gibler says Burris’ message to teens is getting through. ThinkFirst frequently does audience surveys and speakers like Burris are often identified as the most compelling part of a presentation.

“The program hinges on that personal, heart-felt testimony,” Gibler says. “Our speakers have to be genuine and real about the mistakes they’ve made.”

In addition to speaking to high school students and other groups, Burris has become an advocate for safe driving laws including seat belt and distracted driving laws. He has appeared before Missouri state lawmakers to deliver his message to them, as well.

“He represents us in all we do,” says Gibler. She says Burris has a way of connecting with audiences, which made him a natural choice for the 2019 VIP Speaker of the Year award.

“He takes audiences through his personal experience,” she says. “He doesn’t harp. He doesn’t wag his finger. He shares his message in a loving way.”

Burris was happy to have his efforts recognized.

“I was very humbled and honored,” he says. “I’m very passionate about ThinkFirst. Even when I’ve had job or schedule changes, I’ve told my employer ‘I can do them as long as I can keep doing ThinkFirst programs.’”

Burris says everyone is vulnerable to sleep deprivation.

“It’s not the number of times you get away with driving while drowsy that matters,” he says. “It’s that one time you don’t get away with it that matters.”

Participating in ThinkFirst has enabled him to turn a negative experience into a positive one.

“I do it with the hope of getting through to someone,” he said. “I do it with the hope that I can change lives.”

ThinkFirst has chapters in hospitals, medical universities and healthcare settings throughout the U.S. and internationally that provide community education programs on road safety and injury prevention. Educational safety programs

include safety on the road, making safe choices, concussion recognition, prevention of falls and infant safety.

ThinkFirst Road Safety initiatives are funded in part by the Illinois Department of Transportation and General Motors. For more information on ThinkFirst and its programs call 630-961-1400 or visit thinkfirst.org.

