



Reality hurts. Called "Operation Prom Night," a detailed crash re-enactment skit reminds teenagers to buckle up every time they get in a car.

CRASH COURSE

**Risky Business Presents the Dangers of Driving
Without Safety Belts**



The Risky Business team has presented to more than 100,000 students in central and southern Illinois. The team includes (clockwise from top) Sharon Sander, Anita Weinhoef, Mary Kay Reed and Danny Hicks.

It was the afternoon of July 17, 1990. Danny Hicks had just graduated high school a month earlier when two friends suggested they go for a drive around Lake Springfield. After they all had downed a few beers, the driver began speeding and at a sharp curve in the road lost control of the Ford Bronco, which was thrown 10 feet in the air and smashed into a pine tree, coming to rest on its side.

None of the passengers was wearing a safety belt. All had blood alco-

hol levels above the legal limit.

Though one friend came through the accident needing only stitches, the backseat passenger was killed, and Hicks — after being hurled through the car's windshield — suffered a T3 and T4 complete spinal cord injury and will never walk again.

Two months after the crash, Hicks awoke from a coma on the third floor of Memorial Medical Center. After a long and challenging recovery, he returned to the same floor of the hospital two years later — only this time

as a speaker for the Risky Business Program, which allows him to tell his story to thousands of grade school and high school students.

Risky Business, part of SIU School of Medicine's Division of Orthopaedic Surgery, is a head and spinal cord injury prevention program and part of the national injury prevention program, "Think First™." Mary Kay Reed, M.P.A., R.N., the coordinator for the program, says the team, which also includes community educator Sharon Sander and office coordinator



Hicks and Reed use a character famous for his accidents to illustrate the need for road safety.

Anita Weinhoef, has presented programs in 40 counties in central and southern Illinois covering the entire east and west sides of the state, talking to students from kindergarten through high school about the importance of buckling up.

"Teenagers often don't understand the consequences of risk-taking behavior," says Reed. "They think that if you get injured, either you die, or you get better. The reality is that disability does happen." According to the Spinal Cord Injury Information Network, motor vehicle crashes are the number one cause of all the spinal cord injury cases reported — nearly 39 percent.

The goal of Risky Business is to educate students so that they can make an informed decision every time they get in a car. "A level of knowledge can change behavior," says Reed, who was working with SIU spine surgeon Shannon Stauffer, M.D., at the time Hicks was a patient — coincidentally the same year the Risky Business program began. In the dozen years since, Reed has observed the incidence of adolescent spinal cord injuries decrease following the presentations.

Using slides, videos, hands-on

exhibits and victim speakers like Hicks, the Risky Business team has delivered the program to more than 100,000 students.

During the presentations, Reed provides a basic medical explanation of a spinal cord injury to students using food: a cantaloupe represents the skull, a gelatin mold becomes a brain model and licorice is useful to explain the workings of the spinal cord.

Other presenters relate facts and figures, and the students are especially fascinated by Hicks' story and are curious about how his injury has affected his life.

"I tell them how I had to get used to people staring at me," he says. "How my friends changed ... How it has affected my daily hygiene ... How I have to drive with hand controls. I enable students to see how different their lives would be if they were disabled." Hicks is now a community affairs specialist for the program.

With an average of 150 Risky Business programs presented each year for numerous grade levels, many students are hearing the message more than once. "Kids come up to me," says Hicks, "saying they saw the program a few years earlier, and since then they've been wearing their safety belts. That makes me feel good." A senior citizen division of the program is in the works to encompass more of the community.

Participation in Child Passenger Safety checkpoints and bicycle safety awareness are other ways Risky Business reaches out to the community. Indeed, community involvement makes much of Risky Business possible, according to Reed. The collective effort of paramedics, emergency technicians, school staff, the Illinois Department of Transportation, the secretary of state's office, Illinois Safe Kids, local and state law enforcement, the sheriff's office, the Springfield Safe Communi-

ties program and others who work with the Risky Business program are focused on the common goal of promoting the use of safety belts. "With our limited resources, the key to successful outreach is for all of us to maximize our resources by working together more efficiently," says Reed.

That collective effort makes possible an annual spring presentation at local schools at which paramedics, emergency medical technicians, the coroner's office and school staff collaborate to re-enact an automobile crash using junkyard cars and volunteer "victims." Called "Operation Prom Night," the dramatic production includes everything from the horrifying sound of the initial impact to the precarious process of victim extrication and the anxiety associated with emergency medical care.

Adding to the power of the presentation, the coroner pronounces the "victims" dead, and funeral home officials discuss the fine points of planning a burial.

Though the team hesitates to take too much credit, Hicks does point out the influence of Risky Business. In 1990, when Hicks was undergoing rehabilitation at Memorial Medical Center, "the rehab unit was filled with teenagers," he recalls. "But if you go there right now, there are only a few, if any, patients with spinal cord injuries."

Unfortunately, Hicks and his friends' risky business of driving drunk without safety belts resulted in disaster, but Hicks has turned this tragedy into his life's work.

"I'm happy with my life," says Hicks, who has earned a blue belt in Tae Kwon Do and sings bass in The Land of Lincoln Barbershop Chorus.

"I turn my horrible experience into a positive thing every day. It sounds crazy, but I look forward to talking about the crash," he says. "When I go to those schools, I know I'm going to save another life." ■