

Helping Fellow Burn Survivors

Vienna man creates foundation to help burn survivors.

By Joanna Franco
The Connection

Growing up in Buffalo, David “Dave” Borowski’s life looked almost all American. Outgoing and charismatic, Borowski had seven siblings and played trombone and baseball.

But unlike the other children, Borowski would always get stares from people. One girl would start screaming uncontrollably whenever she saw him. Even though Borowski was perfectly healthy, had suffered severe burns as an infant, disfiguring his face and body.

“When you’re growing up, kids can be tough,” said Borowski, who moved to the Washington, D.C., area in 1981.

Because of his past, Borowski wanted to protect the future of other burn survivors. The Vienna resident recently created the Flicker of Hope Foundation with two aims in mind: to help other burn survivors through support groups and resources, and to establish a scholarship fund to help burn survivors go to college or trade school.

“The foundation is just my opportunity to give back, because I’ve been lucky,” said Borowski, who works by day at Freddie Mac as director of Funding & Investments.

Those who know Borowski applaud his efforts to support burn survivors, particularly children.

“People who have had burn injuries and residual scarring—it’s often hard for those folks to be comfortable in society,” said Leslie Baruch of Charlottesville, who is director of the Central Virginia Burn Camp for children. “For Dave to be as comfortable as he is, he displays that confidence to others.”

Borowski has had scars from burns almost all his life. When he was 6 week old, a puppy chewed on an electrical cord, igniting a fire and causing second- and third-degree burns on Borowski. Doctors told his parents that he wouldn’t live.

But Borowski did live, and coasted through adolescence until a doctor told him of a scholarship opportunity. Figuring he had nothing to lose, Borowski got the scholarship and earned a bachelor’s degree in finance. He continued his education and received a master’s degree in finance.

“That scholarship really turned my life around,” Borowski said.

A job with the Federal government in commodities brought him down to the Washington area in 1981. In 1986, he moved to Freddie Mac, where he has been working ever since. He married in 1995.

REALIZING HOW important the scholarship was to the outcome of his life, Borowski wanted to help other burn survivors fulfill their dreams. He started out as a counselor at a burn camp for children in 1996.

“He imparts a very strong message to them, how important education is,” Baruch said. “He’s very supportive. Just by being there, he allows the kids to ask questions of him. He just has this ease of interaction with kids. There’s just no pity. He knows what they’ve been through, and he knows the challenges they face.”

Also in 1996, Borowski became involved in advocating fire-resistant sleepwear. When the Consumer Product Safety Commission relaxed its standards for infant sleepwear that year, Borowski began working with the fire safety community and members of Congress to reinstate safety standards. That work is still ongoing.

While working for burn camps, Borowski met Renee Stilwell of Clifton, who is currently chair of the organization Aluminum Cans for Burn Children (ACBC). Stilwell is the parent of a burn survivor and public information officer for Fairfax County’s Fire and Rescue Department.

Stillwell and Borowski worked together on ACBC, and Borowski helped administer the organization’s grants.

When Stillwell needed speakers for a fire education conference six years ago, she immediately thought of Borowski, knowing that his charisma would create an impression among educators.

“Dave has many different roles that he plays, and he’s good in all of them,” said Stilwell.

STILLWELL EXPLAINED that the foundation and Borowski’s work can impact burn survivors on a personal and political level. Burn survivors’ self-esteem can improve when they are given the right support.

“We live in a society that loves physical beauty,” Stilwell said. “It’s a challenge every day, especially for children. It can be very crippling.”

Stilwell added that enabling burn survivor children today will help them become self-sufficient adults in the future.

“It’s beneficial to the entire community,” Stilwell said. “If children can be educated, they’re not wards of the state.”

Because burn survivor children face those challenges on top of the typical pressures of being an adolescent, Borowski wants the foundation's outreach and scholarship program to focus on the 12-17 age group, although he talks with burn survivors of all ages.

"I want them to understand that the package is immaterial," Borowski said.

The foundation's first scholarship recipient was a Maryland woman who attended massage school. As a burn survivor, she had difficulty in being touched. Now that woman wants a career that requires physical contact with others.

"I got the door open, and I'm opening it for you," Borowski said.

More

For more information about The Flicker of Hope Foundation and its scholarship program, call 703-698-1626, e-mail info@flickerofhope.org, or go to the foundation's Web site at www.flickerofhope.org.