

Vienna Resident Sends Out an Upbeat Message

Childhood Burn Injuries Haven't Stopped David Borowski From Achieving Success

By Brian Trompeter
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David Borowski shouldn't be alive.

In 1954, when he was 6 weeks old, his family's puppy chewed through an electrical wire and set his bassinette on fire. In the brief period it took his mother to notice and extinguish the blaze, he suffered second- and third-degree burns over much of his body.

Borowski lost his right hand, several fingers on his left hand and much of his right ear, and suffered severe burns on his face, arms and legs. The damage was so extensive that doctors prepared his family for the likelihood he would die.

But with determination and the constant support of his family, Borowski survived and made the most of his opportunities. He graduated from high school in his home town of Buffalo, N.Y., and after several aimless years punctuated by low-level jobs, earned an economics degree from Canisius College.

While many burn victims become reclusive from fear of society's judgments, Borowski did the opposite. Forced in infancy to communicate with words instead of gestures, he immediately engaged people in conversation to show them his true personality.

"A person will be judged by what they are on the inside," said Borowski, a Vienna resident. "The package becomes irrelevant."

Some parents of burn victims withdraw emotionally out of guilt, but his took a tough-love approach. If he wanted ice cream, he had to figure out how to manipulate his hands to bring the dessert into his mouth. When he repeatedly was arrested for petty offenses, they let him stew in jail overnight to effect an attitude adjustment.

Borowski underwent more than 50 surgeries by the time he was 27, including one that gave him eyebrows again. Eyebrows are not just cosmetic features. They prevent rain and sweat from running down one's forehead and into the eyes.

Borowski, 51, is director of new products investment accounting with Tysons Corner-based Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp., or Freddie Mac.

"So you're a lefty, too? Cool!" he said to a visitor in his office. It's an icebreaker for Borowski, who manages some incredibly dexterous feats with his reconstructed left hand.

His typing is hunt-and-peck, but quick, and he can use a calculator or check his Blackberry's e-mail as quickly as most people with 10 fingers.

Years ago, after reading a newspaper article about burn survivors, Borowski decided it was time to help others who'd undergone similar traumas. He began volunteering at the Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp and gave hope to his young charges.

Among them were two daughters of Fort Washington, MD, resident Lenneth Baptist, who were burned in a house fire 10 years ago. The girls, now 13 and 18 years old, have thrived despite their injuries and Baptist credits Borowski for encouraging the.

"He's a very strong person," she said. "I look up to him."

Tonas Kalil, co-director of the Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp, said Borowski's public-speaking skills and upbeat message give hope to the camp's clients.

"He inspires them to do more with their lives," Kalil said. "He tells them very quickly, 'You can do anything.' He personifies that."

In 2003 Borowski and his wife of 10 years, Kerry, formed the nonprofit Flicker of Hope Foundation, which provides support, financial assistance and inspiration for people with burn injuries. He leads a discussion group for burn survivors on the second Wednesday of each month at the American Red Cross in Alexandria.

"We try to infuse in kids that nothing is beyond the scope of a determined individual with a positive attitude," he said.

The foundation has given away 11 scholarships, worth a total of \$46,000, to 10 people. Thanks to Borowski's financial expertise, the organization spends only 3.4 percent of its moneys on operating expenses.

Fire safety is another important cause for Borowski. He's livid that the Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1996 lowered fire-resistance standards for children's clothing. In fact, the new standards dictate no fire-proof clothing for children under 9 months, as allegedly they are immobile.

Borowski lauds cigarette lighters with safety features and cigarettes that self-extinguish quickly when not being smoked. He also would prefer that no candle be sold unless surrounded by a jar and that safer mattresses be sold to the public.

"We have flame-resistant mattresses in jails, but not in homes." He said. "Talk about perversity in society."

The foundation is financed by donations, corporate grants and sales of his autobiography, "On a Ring and a Prayer." The title springs from his mother's prayers during the months after his accident. When her son was out of danger, his mother placed

her engagement ring on a statue of Jesus in her church as recompense for the emotional bulwark her faith had provided.

Borowski often speaks to fire-fighter groups to remind them of the importance of their work and occasionally chats up young pyromaniacs in the Fairfax County Juvenile Firestarter Program. For the latter, he minces no words.

“That is the only time I scare the hell out of them,” he said. “I say, ‘These are things that will bother you for the rest of your life. Every day you’ll be looking in the mirror at something that didn’t have to happen. Living with a burn injury is a life sentence. It never goes away.’”

To learn more about the foundation, call (703) 698-1626 or visit www.flickerofhope.org. “On a Ring and a Prayer” is available for \$12.99 from Amazon.com.