

Success follows Tragedy

When I first started providing risk management and safety services to public schools in Wisconsin many years ago, one of the very first claims that I was involved with was a tragic incident that occurred at Ellsworth School District. A very talented high school student, Tasha Schuh, fell through a trap door during a dress rehearsal for the play *The Wizard of Oz*. In my career, there have been many severe incidents that have happened at our school clients. All of them are difficult. We also have learned a great deal on how to prevent similar incidents from reoccurring. One of the goals of our school safety program is that every person that walks into one of our school buildings should leave in the same condition. The insurance carrier paid \$6,000,000 on this claim covered by the general liability policy. The reason the claim was this high was due to the location of the incident, Minnesota. I frequently remind my school clients that the immunity caps in Wisconsin for liability claims do not apply outside of the state. If you have school groups traveling out of state for any reason, you need to carry high occurrence limits for such a claim.

After her fall through the trap door, she did live. That was a miracle. And now, years after the incident that left her a quadriplegic, she has survived this terrible incident and is now speaking to school assemblies throughout the country on many school topics. I heard her speak to a school assembly this past year and she was simply amazing. She effectively outlines the complicated issues surrounding the topic of bullying in our schools. I have asked her to write an article about her story and what she is doing today. I have heard her speak on three separate occasions, and she is one of the best speakers I have ever heard. We are experiencing an increase in claims from aggressive student behavior and this is one tool to use to help thwart future acts of violence.

Here is Tasha's story:

"One step backward. I never thought in my first 16 years growing up that one simple step could change my life forever in such a dramatic way. This is exactly what happened, however, on November 11, 1997 in Red Wing, Minnesota. As I

write in my book: “On this date, the new Tasha Schuh was born. The Tasha Schuh who will never again *stand* over six feet tall. The Tasha Schuh who panics at the sight of a sore on her leg because she knows it may take weeks, maybe months to heal. The Tasha Schuh who painfully mourned the death of Christopher Reeve because she could relate so well to his struggles. The *new* Tasha Schuh ironically remembers almost every detail of her birth, from the first moment of that day.” Come with me on a brief journey of how that step led me to where I am now.”

Tasha Schuh was born and raised in the small farming community of Ellsworth, Wisconsin. Her parents owned a grocery store in town and she often worked there evenings and weekends during her high school years. She also loved to have fun with friends and was quite active in school activities: volleyball, basketball, choir, and National Honor Society. Acting was where her true passion was, however, and as a sophomore she landed the lead role of Sandy in her high schools performance of Grease.

By her junior year Tasha was excited to learn the more technical aspects of theater, as it had become her goal to pursue a career in theatrical arts; thus, she decided to take on a role as a chorus member for The Wizard of Oz. Three days prior to opening night, during a hectic rehearsal, Tasha was on stage practicing a scene change when she inadvertently fell backward through an open trap door. She plunged 16 feet to a cement floor, landing on her head and breaking her neck. The resulting paralysis took her ability to walk, and less than a week later nearly took her life.

Following a 16 hour neck surgery and three days of labored breathing, a deadly blood infection known as septic shock set in. Due to her paralysis and weakened condition Tasha was placed in a coma for eight days as she clung to life. The prognosis for that week was grim; doctors did not expect her to survive. Her fever soared to a staggering 108 degrees, triggering concern that if she did live there was a chance that she would be contending with permanent brain damage. She neither died nor had brain damage - it was a miracle. The battle was not over however, as being a C-5 quadriplegic would test her spirit and emotions in the

coming months. Rehabilitation progressed slowly, but eventually Tasha returned to the school and hometown she had known before the accident. Despite the desire to go back to life as it was, Tasha discovered that there was now a new normal for her as she found it difficult to completely fit back in with the friends and lifestyle she had known prior to the accident. “I will say that I am forever grateful to the insurance company for the financial assistance that helped pay for my hospital bills, wheelchair, and continuing cares after returning home,” Schuh relates. “Having quadriplegia at my level is a very costly injury, one that will forever impact my life; with their help I am able to live a full and healthy life, one in which I can actually use my story to help others.”

Fast forward 17 years and that is exactly what you will find Tasha doing. She still calls the cheese curd capital of Wisconsin her home, but this is not the same person who left the hospital in 1998; she is the new Tasha Schuh. Shortly after crossing the Ellsworth High School platform to receive her diploma in the spring of 1999 Tasha left home to create and pursue her new dreams. Along the way, she earned bachelor degrees from Winona State University in Communications Studies. She relearned how to drive using her arms, built a home, wrote and released her first book titled **My Last Step Backward**, and married the love of her life in 2013. The road that she has traveled includes numerous awards: Ms. Wheelchair USA and the National Rehabilitation Champion Award (both in 2012), recognition by the Wisconsin State Legislature, and the 2014 Winona State Young Distinguished Alumni Award. Tasha Schuh is a fighter, survivor, and an overcomer; her passion is to inspire and educate others on how to do the same with their lives. Her main keynote, ‘Little is Huge’, challenges listeners to pursue their purpose in life, doing so with an attitude of gratitude, and always focusing on being hopeful rather than hopeless. One of her main audiences that she loves speaking for are middle and high school students; she communicates about relevant topics such as bullying, suicide (yes, there was a time she thought of that), and making the best of life regardless of circumstance. The recurring theme from the testimonials on Tasha’s website is: Tasha is an absolute must in every high school. According to Joe Schmit, Sports Director at KSTP in St. Paul, “If you love the word ‘hope’ you need to hear Tasha Schuh speak”. With the current

suicide epidemic and media surrounding bullying, Tasha is a surefire way to positively redirect students and help combat the issues that every high school in America is facing. In addition to schools, her wheels now take her across the nation sharing this message of inspiration and hope at conferences, churches, and organizations. Her current Permobil chair is about to cross the 1,000 mile mark – that’s 1,000 miles in only three years. Since the accident occurred that fateful November evening in 1997, Tasha’s journey has given new meaning to the 1984 lyrics sung by Matthew Wilder, “Ain’t nothin’ gonna break my stride, nobody’s gonna slow me down”. And no one has! She loves her life and at every turn along the road, she has truly discovered what it means to “enjoy the ride”!

I hope this story has inspired you.

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