

QUADRIPLAGIC TELLS TEENS HOW A SPLIT-SECOND ACCIDENT CAN CHANGE THE REST OF THEIR LIVES

Students' eyes opened to paralyzing accidents

Effort to raise money for spinal cord research taken to high schools

BY DAWN LIERSCH
Staff Writer

Markham's Anita Kaiser will always remember the day her life skidded out of her control.

She was cruising down the highway with her twin sister 3-1/2 years ago, when their vehicle suddenly blew a tire and rolled several times down the road.

Her sister, the driver, escaped remarkably unscathed, but Kaiser couldn't move her arms and legs and worried they had been broken in the crash. She also had an aching pain in her neck that she believed to be whiplash.

However, the athletic young woman, then 24, wasn't expecting to be told she had broken her neck and would never walk again.

"It was too much of a shock. I didn't believe him (the doctor)," she said.

Now a low-level quadriplegic, meaning she has some limited upper-body movement, Kaiser still believes she will some day walk again, if there's enough money raised to fund research for a cure for spinal cord injuries.

A former Aurora High student, she told students at the school of her wish during a unique fundraiser

and awareness campaign there in March and April. Kaiser and former student Carlos Gonsalves, also a quadriplegic, organized the event.

Students were shown slides of car crash scenes and told of other scenarios where spinal cord injuries might occur, such as diving in shallow water, sports and work-related accidents.

They were also shown the aftermath in hospital, including weeks in a cumbersome halo apparatus to keep the neck stable or back braces for injuries to the backbone.

They were further told of the lengthy rehabilitation process involving extensive physiotherapy, occupational therapy and learning to use adaptable aids to help with everyday tasks such as eating, brushing your teeth and getting dressed.

"Although many people have suffered these tragedies, it's not like life is over. We're out there working and participating in many sports," Kaiser said.

"The big thing is, don't put your life on hold."

The students were also told spinal cord research has been progressing by leaps and bounds and there is great hope there'll some day be a cure.

"Ten years ago, we weren't even allowed to speak about research," said Barry Munro, vice-president of the Canadian Spinal Research Organization, a Richmond Hill-

based national charity dedicated to funding research for spinal cord injuries.

"Ninety per cent of what we know about spinal cord injuries, we've learned in the last 10 years."

Munro said more than 1,000 Canadians suffer a spinal cord injury each year, with the average injury occurring at age 19. The average cost for care is more than \$2 million.

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The Aurora students did their part to help the cause. They raised \$4,265 for spinal cord research through a wheelchair relay and fashion show.

Kaiser said the event was meant to be fun — with Much Music Video Dance as a sponsor, there were plenty of great prizes up for grabs — and at the same time give students some serious insight about what it's like to be in a wheelchair.

"It was tough, particularly going uphill, and even just wheeling around," said Matt Dawson, an

OAC student who participated in the relay.

"It gets you thinking more about that kind of stuff (spinal cord injuries). It was fun, a challenge and we learned some interesting things."

Grade 10 student Peter Davies even cut up his hands on the spokes of his wheelchair while trying to propel it faster.

"It makes you understand what (people in wheelchairs) have to go through. An investment should be made to help them," he said.

And Kaiser and Gonsalves aren't the only students from the school to suffer such an injury. About seven former students from the school have suffered spinal cord injuries to date.

When Kaiser was in Grade 10, she recalls hearing how Gonsalves was left a quadriplegic following a car accident.

Eleven years ago, Gonsalves was the passenger in a Suzuki Samurai that flipped four times down Hwy. 404 near Stouffville Sideroad after the steering wheel locked to the right.

Gonsalves visited the school for a fundraiser shortly after the accident and Kaiser remembers the impact of seeing him confined to a wheelchair.

"It was a real blow. It hit us all hard, especially when he was an athlete — we sometimes look at them as invincible," she said.

"I thought it was a tragedy, but I still never thought I was living a risky life."

Still, Kaiser says she made a choice on the day of her accident. Attendants at a gas station had warned her and her sister that the tread was low on their front tire, but also said it would probably last long enough for them to reach their destination.

The Kaiser twins decided to forge ahead despite the risks.

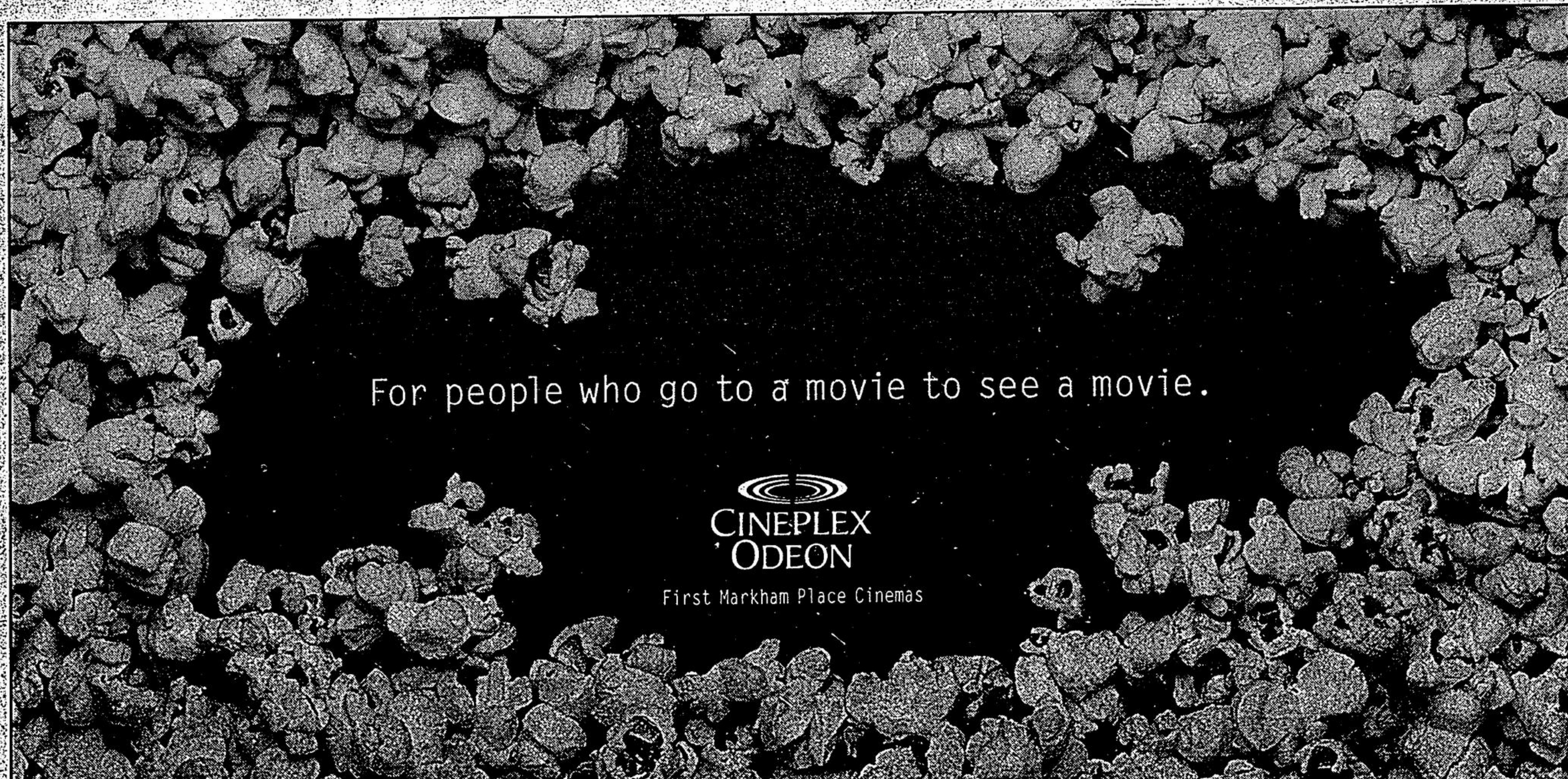
"It taught me that cars aren't toys. You have to look after them and make sure they have check-ups," she said.

"Our goal is to enforce the whole safety issue — everyone has choices they make."

Although Kaiser admits to being upset about the accident, she said Gonsalves helped her to keep a positive outlook. She was reunited with him two months after her accident when they met during rehabilitation.

"I was fresh, I was new and everything was scary. I thought my life was over — that I would be dependent on others for the rest of my life. Then I saw everything he could do and it built up my confidence to move forward," she said.

"He told me I have a choice — I can choose to be happy or choose to be unhappy. I chose to be happy and make a positive out of a negative ... I call him my guru — my old wise man."



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