

Starting Over: Amy Varecha

Amy Varecha is living a whole new life. "I have been born again," the Frenchtown New Jersey resident says, reflecting on how her life has changed since she sustained a brain injury back in 1990. "I've learned to appreciate everything. I don't take anything for granted."

Amy sustained her brain injury when she was involved in an automobile crash at 19 years old. She was out partying with her friends, and on their way back home their car hit a guard rail and went off an embankment. None of the passengers were wearing seatbelts, and the driver was killed. When emergency crews arrived on the scene they had to revive Amy several times. She had several broken bones and internal injuries, and she was left legally blind.

Now, 18 years and many reconstructive surgeries later, Amy is a new person.

"I don't remember much about my life before the accident," she says. "It's like some things didn't even happen. Most people look back on their prom or the day they got their driver's license. But I can't remember any of that."

With no memories of her past life, Amy had to start over following her brain injury. Her mother, Jeannette Tynan, stayed by her side, and helped her re-learn a lot of the things she had forgotten how to do.

"There was no time to grieve," Ms. Tynan said, adding that she purchased books for Amy and started teaching her everything all over again--from basic things like reading and speech to math and other subjects.

Amy and her mother worked hard on the recovery process. And now Amy has embraced her new life, and she has learned to appreciate things so much more.

One of the things she is extremely appreciative of is her seeing eye dog/best friend "Schatzie," named after the German word meaning "sweetheart."

Amy lives in an extension of her mother's house, which provides her with some independence, but also keeps her close to family in case she needs anything. She often walks into her small town with Schatzie. The people of the community have come to know her and her beloved dog quite well.



Amy is also involved in community activities. She is very active with her church, and she teaches third and fourth grade Sunday school. She has also volunteered at a local nursing home. While on her walks into town Amy enjoys seeing all of the flowers, trees, and other forms of nature.

Amy doesn't mind discussing her injury and what happened on the day of the crash. In fact, she often speaks to students at New Jersey High Schools about prevention. "Sometimes as a teenager you feel invincible," Amy explains. "But you have to be smart about the choices you make." This is the advice Amy shares with the students to whom she speaks. "If I can save just one life then it's all worth it," she said.

She also has advice for other individuals with brain injuries: "Just keep on trying, no matter how frustrating things get."

Amy plans to continue speaking at schools. She is currently looking for a job, but it has to be something within walking distance since she cannot drive. She works hard to cope with her new life. She has no short-term or long-term memory, so unless something very important happens (such as a major holiday) she cannot remember most things. But each and every day Amy continues to live her "new" life--one in which she appreciates even the smallest of details.

"She's my little engine that could," her mom says. "It was like having one daughter for 19 years and then getting a whole new one. But I couldn't be more proud of her."