

Brush with death couldn't hold back local man

By Jeff Danna
Triblocal Staff Reporter

Mike Lavit could have spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair, paralyzed.

Nine years ago, the 62-year-old Vernon Hills resident and co-founder of ThermoSoft International Corp. in Buffalo Grove was struck by an intoxicated motorist as he walked to the mailbox outside his home.

"My skull was out, my neck was like this," he said, stretching his hands apart. Having grown up in Belarus, in the former Soviet Union, he speaks with a thick accent. "I was pretty beat up."

Doctors told him that in the best-case scenario, he would be wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life. Lavit refused to accept that answer and through therapy and the support of his wife, Svetlana, he regained his movement.

"I learned how to walk again, I learned how to talk again—I learned everything," he said. He stood up from his chair in the ThermoSoft offices and hopped up and down.

The accident was just one of a series of struggles Lavit has faced. Ironically, his own father became paralyzed from a stroke when Lavit was 10, and at that early age, his responsibilities increased.

He also was a gymnast, but when he entered his teenage years, he began playing soccer. By the time he was 15, he was attending a trade school in the former Soviet Union.

He also began playing for a soccer club, which in the Soviet Union wasn't the same as playing professionally elsewhere, he explained.

"In the ex-Soviet Union, they didn't have sports professionally—they just had Olympics," Lavit said.

Early in his soccer career, at age 21, he injured his knee, which ended his playing days. He began refereeing, and he said he was probably one of the youngest referees in the Soviet Union.

But life in the country at the time was not pleasant. In 1971, Lavit traveled as a tourist to Yugoslavia, where he "saw how people could live and how people could dress and how people could smile." It was then he said he knew he wanted to leave the Soviet Union.

Like other immigrants, Lavit came to America with his family seeking freedom and opportunity. They settled on the far north side of Chicago in what is now the city's Indian community, near the Devon Avenue corridor.

Lavit and his family spoke no English when they came to Chicago, but he said he managed to communicate. While waiting to come to the United States, he stayed in Italy for three months and learned to speak Italian.

Because of commonalities between Italian and Spanish, Lavit was able to converse with members of Chicago's growing Hispanic population and other Spanish-speakers.

Lavit eventually learned English, as did his family. In the first several years in Chicago, he bounced from job to job, doing what he could to support his family.

After his first job at an auto repair shop, he became a painter, then a foreman at a decorating company, then a truck driver. In 1984, he started his own trucking company, and by the late 1980s, he had started a financial brokerage company.

In 1995, Lavit met Eric Kochman, a scientist whom Lavit attempted to recruit to work at his financial company. But it was Kochman, also a native of the former Soviet Union, who ended up recruiting Lavit for a start-up company called ThermoSoft, which makes electric heating products like radiant flooring devices.

"We've been friends ever since," Kochman said.

The two shared more than just a home country, though. (Today, they would actually be considered to be from different countries: Lavit from Belarus, Kochman from Russia.) They also had both been athletes in the Soviet Union. Kochman said he had played rugby, and he added that he and Lavit shared a drive that comes with being an immigrant in the United States.

Lavit's accident with the intoxicated driver came a few years after the founding of Buffalo Grove-based ThermoSoft. It impacted not only Lavit, but also those close to him, including Kochman.

"When I went to the emergency room in the hospital, when I saw him, his face was damaged," Kochman said. "He looked at me and said, 'Eric, don't worry.' He said, 'I'll get to work.'

"I was about to pass out."

Kochman said he attribute's Lavit's recovery to character as much as the support of his family and friends.

"He's a very strong guy," Kochman said.

While the accident was a major event in Lavit's life, he said that nine years later, he doesn't dwell on it.

"I never thought about what happened," he said. "It's gone."

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