

Segal turns tragedy into counseling career

Michael Segal inspires others with his story of survival, resilience

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Photo: Marie D. De Jesus, Staff

Social worker Michael Segal has helped raise funds for the new healing garden at Ben Taub Hospital. After his own tragedy in 1981, he is an inspiration to patients with traumatic head injuries. (Marie D. De Jesus / Houston Chronicle)

No one coughed. No one sneezed or shuffled their feet.

Instead, there was silence in Harris County Commissioners Court the winter day that Michael Segal, a public hospital social worker, was honored with what might have been a routine proclamation.

An aide to Commissioner Steve Radack read slowly as she summarized the life and near death of Segal, the first recipient of Ben Taub Hospital's "Keep Hope Alive" award.

After his recovery from a gunshot to the head, the resolution said, Segal finished his education, then devoted himself to helping other trauma victims and their families. As an integral part of the Ben Taub community, the proclamation said, he is constantly looking for ways to offer encouragement - whether he is organizing family support groups, celebrating patients' birthdays or cheering them on during their arduous rehabilitation.

"He's an amazing young man," Radack said. "When that happened to Michael, it rocked the whole southwest side of town."

Segal, 54, sitting in his small office at Ben Taub, says he has told the story of grit and resilience hundreds, maybe thousands of times. When he thinks it useful, he tells it again.

Life-changing event

On Feb. 17, 1981, Segal and his girlfriend were driving back to her dorm after an evening at the library. The students at the University of Texas at Austin hadn't gotten far when he realized he had to stop for gas. It was then, as he stepped into the convenience store to pay his \$2, his life changed forever.

Segal, 19 at the time, had interrupted an armed robbery in progress.

He doesn't remember what happened after that, but his family and court records have filled in the blanks. Three robbers forced him into the cooler in the back of the store. Then one of them put a gun to the back of Segal's skull and pulled the trigger.

Segal's girlfriend, Sharon Weingarten, was still in the car but growing more worried by the moment. When she entered the store, she screamed his name. Then it was a blur of paramedics, police and emergency room doctors.

Segal says none of them thought he would survive the night. When he was still breathing the next morning, a neurosurgeon prepared to operate.

But the doctor let the family know the young man's odds were poor to miserable.

"He said there was a 60-percent chance I'd die on the table, and a 100-percent chance I'd be a vegetable."

By then, Segal's parents had made an agonizing, middle-of-the-night trip from Houston to Austin, and they were looking for any sign of hope.

But there was none. Finally, Segal's dad, Rabbi Jack Segal, pulled Weingarten aside. "You heard the doctor," he said. "If Michael survives, he'll be a vegetable. Go, get on with your life."

"You don't understand," Weingarten said. "Mike is my life."

She took the semester off so that she could stay by his side. And slowly, incrementally, he improved. After three weeks in Austin, he was strong enough to transfer to a rehabilitation hospital in Houston. But he couldn't speak, and his right side was completely paralyzed.

After batteries of tests, a neuropsychologist told Segal he wasn't going back to college, that he needed to set more realistic goals.

Though he couldn't respond to her verbally, he thought, "Who are you to tell me what I can and can't do?"

Eighteen months later, in the fall of 1983, he was back to his classes at UT. He had learned to talk again, albeit slowly, and walk again with a limp. He could no longer write or type with his right hand, but he'd learned to function, nevertheless. And when he wasn't in class, he was in speech, physical and occupational therapy.

"I believe life is not supposed to be easy, not for me, not for the families in this hospital, not for anybody," Segal said. "Life is about overcoming obstacles."

In June 1986, Segal graduated with highest honors and a 3.885 grade point average. As he walked across the stage to pick up his diploma, he received a standing ovation. He thought he couldn't possibly be prouder than he was during those few minutes.

But he was wrong. The next year, 1987, he and Weingarten got married. In 1990, they had their daughter, Shawn. He also received a master's degree in social work from the University of Houston. His heart, he said, was full.

Professionally, he got his start working with local psychiatrists in a pain clinic. His next stop was Memorial Hermann. In 2011, he went to work at Ben Taub as a senior patient liaison. At the hospital, he focuses on patients and families affected by traumatic head injuries and/or spinal cord injuries.

"They're told the worst of the worst," Segal said, speaking slowly. "The doctors, they have their statistics. But when they see me walking, talking, living, then they have hope. They know some people do get better."

Segal is the heart and soul of Ben Taub's weekly support groups for families. He also works with Dr. Niraj Mehta to make sure all patients in the hospital receive a cupcake, balloons and a signed card on their birthdays. Usually, both he and Mehta are there to sing.

"We sing terrible," Segal said.

"Healing begins with feeling," said Mehta, an associate professor of internal medicine and an associate professor of family and community medicine at Baylor College of Medicine. "When I met Michael, I knew we were a match made in heaven. We're like long lost brothers."

Rabbi Segal said he, too, is proud of his son. He is full of folksy adages:

"Focus on the bagel, not the hole."

"Mile by mile is a trial. Yard by yard is hard. But inch by inch, it's a cinch."

"Maybe you used to be able to do 500 things, and now you can only do 200 things. But don't focus on the 300 things you can't do. Focus on the 200 things you can do."

His son tries to follow that advice. He still sounds wistful when he talks about a career as an orthopedic surgeon - that was his goal before the shooting."

But he's over it, he said. "I used to dream of helping people with broken bones. Now I help with broken spirits."