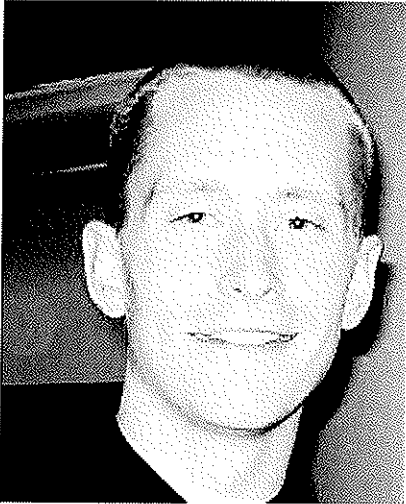


After a night of partying, a terrifying fall

WSU student's intoxicated fall indicative of larger problem among college students



Heffelfinger

Posted: Monday, October 24, 2011 12:00 am | *Updated: 11:34 am, Mon Oct 24, 2011.*

[After a night of partying, a terrifying fall](#) By Stephanie Schendel, Murrow News Service
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At the bottom of a 23-foot retaining wall, a young man lay in a pool of blood. The fall had broken every bone in his face. His teeth were chipped. He was barely conscious.

A police officer called out to him, asking him his name. The body groaned, and slurred something that sounded like "Shawn."

His name wasn't Shawn.

It was just minutes after midnight on Saturday, Sept. 10, and several officers who had responded to the fall feared it would end with a body bag. In the hours that followed, as medical staff worked to save the young man, an officer called the Whitman County coroner.

The officer warned they might need an autopsy.

Nights of drinking lead to ER

Each year, hundreds of WSU students are admitted to the emergency department at Pullman Regional Hospital for an alcohol-related incident or detox after a night of

partying. In the past five years, hospital officials say they have seen a rise in the blood-alcohol level of patients to an average of 0.33 percent - four times the legal limit for driving.

About eight to 10 cases each year are severe enough to be airlifted to another hospital, said Stacey Aggabao, director of the emergency department at Pullman Regional Hospital.

"We get quite a few falls," she said.

Many students appear to be mixing alcohol with stimulants such as caffeine, Aggabao said. The stimulants allow students to continue drinking past the point where they would normally pass out.

For Officer Heidi Lambley, who patrols on weekends in Pullman, it has become a familiar scene - a night of drinking, a walk home in the dark and then a fall from an alarming height.

On May 3, 2009, Lambley responded to a call of what appeared to be an unconscious person next to the Moscow-Pullman Highway. When the police arrived at 5:30 a.m., they found the body of Stuart Robertson, a 21-year-old WSU senior, at the bottom of a 40-foot cliff.

The night before Stuart's death, he was seen leaving a party alone. His autopsy confirmed that he was intoxicated when he fell.

Lambley said the scene was heartbreaking.

"It's a sad way to die by yourself," she said. "I would hate for an end like that for anyone."

Now, two and a half years later, Lambley thought she was seeing it all again.

Another fall from a lethal height

At the bottom of the retaining wall, the young man continued to mumble as he lay on the asphalt. Paramedics strapped him to a backboard and transported to Pullman Regional Hospital.

It was there they learned his name: Chad Heffelfinger, a 20-year-old WSU student.

X-rays showed both of Chad's cheekbones were broken, his jaw was cracked in two places, his nose in three. His skull was fractured, and his right eye socket was destroyed.

"He was one fracture away from severing his face from his skull," Aggabao said.

At Pullman Regional, Chad's childhood friend, Mimi Lee Hall, was taken back to see him just as the hospital staff was preparing to airlift him to Sacred Heart Medical Center in Spokane. They told her that his injuries were too serious for them to handle, and that they suspected severe brain trauma.

He was sedated, and had tubes down his throat to help him breathe. His face was puffy and almost unrecognizable, Hall said.

The following morning, Chad awoke, coughing and choking from the tube down his throat. He was unable to talk, his eyes were swollen shut and he could barely move.

His family had driven from Vancouver, Wash., to be with him.

"He was IVs and tubes," his mother said.

But when he heard his mother's voice, Chad lifted his hand in recognition.

A painful recovery

It was days before Chad was able to speak again. As he began to recover, he communicated through hand motions and thumbs up to show he understood the conversations taking place around him.

Chad doesn't remember the fall, the ambulance, the Pullman hospital, or the helicopter ride. His memory stops after he left the party near where he fell, and the 10-hour concussion-induced blackout begins. He remembers drinking only jungle juice, a sugary drink made with hard liquor.

"I wish more than anything to know what happened to me that night," Chad said.

The police report concluded that Chad most likely climbed over the fence above the retaining wall, where he then lost his balance. He then rolled down the short hill to the top of the retaining wall, where he hit it with enough force to dislodge the top piece of concrete and fall with it.

"Every single night I pray for a flashback to remember why I climbed over the fence," Chad said.

He spent 20 days in the hospital where he underwent two facial surgeries and had nine metal plates inserted in his face. More than a month after his fall, Chad is home with his family in Vancouver. He can't open his mouth all the way, he has frequent headaches, and talking for long periods of time is painful.

But his recovery shocks everyone - the police, his doctors, his family, his friends and himself. He has no neck injury or obvious brain damage. He hopes to return to WSU next semester.

"He's a walking miracle," his mother said.

A problem with no sign of change

In the weekends following Chad's fall, police continued to stop individuals staggering home by themselves. Even the night after Robertson's death, Lambley said, students seemed to be partying even harder and crazier.

"A lot of things go unrecognized by this community - and that's frustrating," she said. "It doesn't seem to have impacted the behaviors of anyone else."

For Lambley, the thought of two students in similar accidents is difficult. One died. One lived. And she knows it could happen again.