

**The Weekend From Hell – and
That Much Needed Conversation**

Robert M. Cassello
Mohawk Mountain, CT Region

It was a typical Friday night, January 5, 2001, at my home mountain. I was filling in for another patroller who had a family commitment. The night began like any other, but that would soon change.

A snowboarder with a friend walked into the patrol room complaining that he couldn't feel his legs. Following my assessment and lots of questions from another patroller, we decided to do a standing backboard take-down. We asked a third patroller to call for an ALS due to a suspected spinal injury. As we lowered our patient to the floor, the mountain manager came into the patrol room, yelling that there was a skier HANGING from a chair at the top of lift 2.

He and I immediately left the patrol room. He gave me his snowmobile as the lift was obviously shut down and it was the fastest way to the top of the mountain. When I arrived, the lift operator and another maintenance person had lowered the skier into the safety net. She was a 13-year-old girl whose helmet became wedged between the seat and the safety bar, leaving her hanging from the chair. (We sometimes have kids jump from the chair onto the slope, where the chair is about 7 to 10 feet above the slope.)

I eased myself onto the safety net but then realized the scene was not safe with four of us in the net. We needed to fix our own safety – and provide CPR to the girl. Together, we removed her from the net by crawling up to the unloading platform. There was no pulse and no breathing. We began CPR. Making things worse were the other skiers on the chair screaming and crying.

At the base, a paramedic arrived for the initial patient, but he was brought to the top of the lift with full equipment where he intubated the girl while we worked on her for several minutes. We had a sense of optimism as there was advanced help on-scene. Other patrollers soon arrived. After about 30 minutes, we brought her down in a toboggan behind a snowmobile. I was doing compressions while the paramedic ventilated her with a BVM. At the base, we moved her into the ambulance that sped off to the hospital. When I went back to the patrol room, the mother was there and screaming hysterically. The father soon came in and the two of them left for the hospital to be with their daughter.

All patrollers involved stayed for a few hours to complete their reports and talk. We all felt that we had done everything we could've done. But this was a losing battle. It was about 2:00 AM in the morning when another patroller and I went to the hospital to see how the young girl was doing, realizing that we were not hopeful. When we arrived, one of the nursing staff told us that she was being transferred to another hospital where her organs could be harvested and someone else's life might be improved.

By the time I arrived home, it was well after 3:00 AM and I needed to be in Massachusetts for a Senior OEC Exam later that day (Saturday), and we had to be on the road by 5:30 AM. A good friend joined me for the 2-hour ride. Soon after we arrived, the Division OEC Supervisor approached and asked how I was doing following the events of the night before. I had all I could do to not to burst into tears. We walked and talked for a few minutes. I found it to be very helpful.

With the day's events behind us, my friend drove me back to my home. I was exhausted – and my regular patrol shift began the next morning on Sunday.

When I arrived at the mountain that morning, my Hill Captain asked me how I was doing. I completely fell apart. Emotionally I was at my wits end. I couldn't even talk. I heard that the Connecticut CISD team had come down on Saturday and spoke with everyone involved in that Friday night accident. We made a call to the CISD team and asked for someone to come down to talk with me. By noon, a gentleman arrived and we went off to be alone and had that much needed conversation. We sat and talked for a few hours. It was something that I needed.

This is why I feel that a positive intervention is so important for everyone's well-being. I know how it made me feel – when I needed it most. I don't want anyone to ever go through what I went through and not be able to get help.

Several other patrollers and I went to the girl's wake where I had the opportunity to speak with her parents. The dad told me that when they rode the same lift a few weeks before, she said that a lot of kids she knew were jumping from the lift. Her dad said to her, "Please don't try it as you could get hurt."

We later learned that 20+ people's lives had been made better as a result of this incident. So that's an upside to all of this.

The patroller whose shift I covered that Friday night left patrolling because of this incident.