

Mike Shaw had a life-altering injury that ended his career as a professional skier and coach. Today, he teaches athletes and youth how to trust their instincts.



# From grief to gratitude

By Jackie Wong

**Mike Shaw experienced a life-altering injury at work. His story is now inspiring young workers to trust their instincts and speak up about safety.**

Mike Shaw dedicates his professional life to injury prevention, particularly among young people. He does it because he has first-hand knowledge of what it means to lose one's livelihood and identity through a life-altering injury. He also knows how to rebuild and thrive in the wake of it.

Shaw is a former professional skier, an accomplished motivational speaker, and coach. Today, he works with coaches to enhance performance and prevent injuries among athletes by improving their focus, awareness, and mindfulness through a company he co-founded called HeadStartPro Performance and Injury Prevention Training. He's also part of WorkSafeBC's speaking roster, speaking to every Grade 11 student in the Central Okanagan School District about preventing workplace injury by helping them learn to listen to their instincts and act upon them in ways that will keep them safe.

"If I can prevent one injury like mine from happening to someone else, then it's all worthwhile," he says.

It's an effort that could save lives. An average of 18 young workers are injured every day in B.C., and an average of 14 young workers sustain a serious injury every week. Almost 20 percent of workplace incidents among young workers occur during their first month on the job.

"All young-worker injuries and deaths are unacceptable," says Trudi Rondou, WorkSafeBC senior manager, Industry and Labour Services. "If you get a gut feeling that something isn't safe, listen to your instincts. It could save your life or the life of your co-worker."

## **'In an instant, my life had changed forever'**

In his current work with coaches and in classrooms, Shaw provides tools for building mindfulness and awareness so people can become better attuned to their instincts. What he refers to as the "gut-sinking feeling" that signals a dangerous situation is not always

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easy to identify, especially in situations and workplaces where one is walking the edge between danger and safety, an edge Shaw knows well from his former career as a freestyle skier and ski coach.

In December 2013 at the age of 27, Shaw was coaching his freestyle ski team to compete in a halfpipe competition in Summit County, Colorado. After a morning of training, Shaw and his athletes went to a terrain park to ski. “I was performing a routine trick, one of the same tricks that one of my athletes was working on, a 720,” he remembers. “Two full rotations. You take off forwards and land forwards. On landing, I landed in some really soft snow. It pitched me forward onto my face and neck, and my feet came up like a scorpion tail; all the pressure went to my neck, essentially. I felt a very brief but sharp pain.”

In that moment, Shaw says he knew his life had changed irrevocably.

“My goggles slid down over my mouth, I was breathing into them, and music was playing in one of my ears because I had one headphone in. I realized that in an instant, my life had changed forever. I was paralyzed from the neck down.”

Shaw was flown to a hospital in Denver, where he spent almost two weeks in the Intensive Care Unit. As soon as he was stabilized he flew to Vancouver, where he stayed a week at Vancouver General Hospital, then almost three months at GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre.

## A complicated loss

Shaw’s expansive sense of gratitude underscores all aspects of his life today. While he can no longer fully feel his legs, he is able to ski again, which he now describes as “a very cerebral process.”

Gratitude, he says, has been central to how he has processed the many layers of grief he experienced through his spinal cord injury. It’s a complex kind of grief that may affect other injured workers, but which can be hard to put into words.

“I’ve grieved the loss of my identity. I’ve grieved the loss of my career,” he says. “I lost the ability to earn a living the way that I used to. I had to redefine all sorts of things in my life and career for that, and that was challenging.”

Through it all, he was terribly aware of the impact his injury had on the people in his life.

His parents, he recalls, were devastated by the incident and they supported him for years until he got back on his feet. “The impact of my crash didn’t just affect the people who were there that day. It was a ripple effect well beyond what I had anticipated,” he says. “These injuries are not just happening to the person on the inside — they happen to everyone else that’s near and affected. Family members and friends and relationships of all kinds are faced with the grief and the trauma.”

Those layered dimensions of grief, alongside his own experiences with losing loved ones, will inform Shaw’s contributions to the national Day of Mourning on April 28, where he will be speaking at one of the events in B.C.

## Remembering lives lost at work

The Day of Mourning is an annual day to remember people who have lost their lives to work-related injury or occupational disease, and renew our collective commitment to building safe, healthy workplaces. WorkSafeBC, the BC Federation of Labour, the Vancouver District Labour Council, and the Business Council of British Columbia partner to support Day of Mourning events taking place across B.C.

The Day of Mourning is an important day for Shaw. To him, grief is a powerful reminder of the stuff at the heart of the best things in life. “Our pain and suffering is usually in direct proportion to the joy and love that we felt in our lives,” he says. “Life is arguably better if you have loved and lost than if you have never loved at all, and never have had that feeling. Grief is part of living a full life, because you’ll never live a full life without grief.”

If you don't open yourself up to love — loving the people in your life, and loving what you do with your time — “then that's a tragedy,” Shaw says. “That's a bigger tragedy, in my opinion, than the loss itself.” The experience of grief is a forever process, he adds, but the fact that we live with it is an opportunity for gratitude as well. “It just means that loss really mattered.”

It's with this spirit of gratitude and locating the light in dark places that Shaw moves through his days, connecting with young workers and sharing with them what's in his heart.

“It's hard to quantify how many students we will actually help, and how many workplace injuries we prevent,” he notes. “But even if it's one, it's worth it.”

### For more information

Mike Shaw will be speaking at a Day of Mourning ceremony on April 28. See the full list of ceremonies and speakers at [dayofmourning.bc.ca](http://dayofmourning.bc.ca). You can also watch Mike Shaw's TedX talk, [Grief Happens](#), on YouTube. 😊



One year and five months after his injury, Mike Shaw participated in the Wings for Life World Run as an ambassador for spinal cord injury. Here he is at the 10-kilometre mark.

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