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Paraplegic tells students, be careful

BY KERRY LESTER

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A split-second decision to take a shortcut to a college party cost Dale Spencer the use of his legs.

At Bartlett High School Wednesday morning, Spencer urged driver's education students to think first in order to prevent something similar from happening to them.

"I took a lot of risks back then," said Spencer, a local mortgage consultant and Elgin Area School District U-46 board member. "And I'm not here to preach to you now, just to ask you to use your mind to protect your body."

In December 1988, as a junior at Northern Illinois University, Spencer and some friends decided to take a shortcut to a house party near campus.

Walking over railroad tracks, he slipped on a tie and fell between the tracks to a

See **CAREFUL** on **PAGE 5**

Careful: Students ask about driving, dating

Continued from Page 1

river below.

One of his vertebrae was shattered, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

Spencer has served with the ThinkFirst Injury Prevention Foundation since 1994, bringing his message to thousands of students across the state.

In U-46, Spencer has made presentations at Bartlett, South Elgin and Streamwood high schools. Next semester, he will branch out to two district middle schools — Abbott and Ellis, both in Elgin.

ThinkFirst programs, presented to high-schoolers across the country, typically consist of four segments, according to the foundation. Students learn about the anatomy of the brain and spinal chord and how injuries occur. They also are shown a short video featuring testimonies from people whose lives were drastically altered after serious injuries.

Spencer produced the video shown to Bartlett students Wednesday over the last year. He said he featured mostly young people so that it would resonate with kids in school.

Wednesday's classes were curious about the difficulties of driving and Spencer's dating life. Today, Spencer doesn't bat an eyelash at the questions, or become nervous about telling



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U-46 school board member Dale Spencer of Bartlett talks to a driver's education class at Bartlett High School as part of the Think First program.