

Dave Zien talks about his motorcycle crash

By Rick Barrett of the Journal Sentinel April 18, 2011

By Chuck Rupnow of the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram, via McClatchy Tribune Business News

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Dave Zien spoke last week more about the blessings he's received than about the multiple physical injuries and his escape from death in a violent motorcycle crash March 13 in Florida.

The former state senator said he is anxious to get back to the Eau Claire area, but realistically still is basking in the joy of surviving the crash.

"I am just so happy because I am alive," Zien, 61, said by telephone after morning therapy at Tallahassee Memorial Rehabilitation Center, where he expects to stay for another three to six weeks. He lives just northwest of Eau Claire in the Chippewa County town of Wheaton.

"It's given me time to re-examine my life, where I want to spend more time with family and friends," he said. "I have a bucket list of sorts.

"There have been so many cards and letters, which have been so inspiring and motivating. They've made a difference in my recovery," Zien said, adding that medical center staff said no previous patient had ever received so much mail. "Right now, I have no interest to be on a motorcycle again, but someday I might again. All I can say is the grace of God was on me. There is no way I should have survived."

The Florida Highway Patrol reported Zien crashed into an SUV that attempted to change lanes, went out of control and flipped onto its side on Interstate 10 in the Florida Panhandle. Zien tried to take evasive action but was unable to avoid the collision around 6:15 a.m.

The driver of the SUV, Ryan G. Matheny, 24, of Marietta, Ohio, and a 25-year-old passenger received minor injuries. Matheny was charged with failure to maintain a lane and driving with a suspended license.

Zien flew more than 300 feet after impact. His left leg was crushed, causing it to be amputated about 7 inches above the knee. His right hip was shattered, his left hand broken, and he had numerous other injuries. He did not receive a head wound, even though he was not wearing a helmet.

While it was miraculous enough that Zien survived the crash, he also came through several "close call" episodes after his spleen ruptured, and when his blood pressure dropped to life-threatening levels.

"They called the family a couple of times about me," Zien said. "There have been so many people praying; it's almost like people knew what kind of condition I was in and really needed their prayers. I still do.

"Those people have made a difference in my recovery. The (six) surgeries and now the occupational and physical therapies are really draining."

Zien recalls graphic details of events at the emergency room.

"In talking with the doctors, they weren't sure I was going to make it through that, with all the trauma and things," he said.

Zien's condition swayed between serious and critical several more times, especially after he had visitors a few days after the crash, and after he heard reports of damage to the state Capitol during recent protests over Gov. Scott Walker's collective bargaining law.

"You know how I get when I start talking, well, some cyclists managed to get in, and I got excited and got into trouble," Zien said, referring to heart rate and blood pressure concerns. "And when I heard of the damage to that building in Madison, which I love, well, that created some problems too."

Zien's right hip has been rebuilt with plates and eight screws, but it's the pain associated with damage to his spleen that is causing him the most angst.

Zien was in Florida to speak at an American Motorcycle Association event and to receive an award from another motorcycle group.

Zien's motorcycle received more than \$10,000 in damage, but Scripture verses on it remain intact. He said he continuously prays for the hospital staff and their families. (The cycle involved in the crash was not his 1991 Harley-Davidson FXRT -- the one he famously rode for 1 million miles. It now is displayed at the Sturgis Motorcycle Museum & Hall of Fame in South Dakota.)

"He's doing a lot of rehab, which is hard on him and wears him out," said Sue Bowe, Zien's "mate."

"They're training him on how to do things," she said. "I think he knows how fortunate he is to be alive."

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