

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Making the Most of It

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W Mitchell shares his story of survival with La Cumbre students.



Mutilated by burns from a fiery motorcycle accident at age 28, and then paralyzed in a plane crash several years later, one might expect W Mitchell to be down and out today.

But instead, the Santa Barbara millionaire travels the world, sharing his story to inspire others to take responsibility for their lives and focus on strengths, not obstacles.

"It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it," W Mitchell, who goes by "Mitchell," told students Monday at La Cumbre Middle School, where, sponsored by the Santa Barbara Council for Self-Esteem, he was invited to speak through .

After wheeling himself onto the auditorium stage, Mitchell's badly scarred face and fingerless hands caused a hush among the crowded room. He then grabbed students' attention by bluntly asking, "How many of you have ever been in prison?"

It took the students a moment to realize he was referring to "prison" in the figurative sense: "This wheelchair was a prison for me. It kept me from going where I wanted to go, from doing what I wanted to do.

"I've had jobs that were prisons, I've had relationships with women that were like prisons," he continued. "Now, this wheelchair is a vehicle for me."

Mitchell, 58, who lives between Santa Barbara and Hawaii, told students how his brushes with death in two separate accidents forced him to search for courage he never imagined he had.

And instead of feeling sorry for himself, he decided to take control of his life.

"Your life is entirely what you decide it is. The universe starts in your head and spreads out into the world. Change what happens in your head and the universe changes," Mitchell writes in his book, *It's Not What Happens To You, It's What You Do About It*.

Mitchell told the students that some people might consider him the unluckiest man alive for all that he's been through.

In the early 1970s, he suffered burns over 65 percent of his body when he crashed his motorcycle into the side of a laundry truck, which had cut him off at a San Francisco intersection, he said.

The injuries would have been minor if not for a faulty motorcycle gas cap, which fell off on impact, causing fuel to leak and a subsequent explosion. He later received \$500,000 in a lawsuit settlement.

About four years later, after Mitchell was back on his feet and making millions at the head of a company that made energy-efficient stoves, he was set back again: Ice on the wings of the plane he was flying forced him to make an emergency landing.

His passengers were able to bail out unharmed. He, on the other hand, was unable to move. His spinal cord was struck in such a way that he became paralyzed from the waist down.

Even after that incident, Mitchell persevered.

"Before all of this happened to me, there were 10,000 things I could do," he told students. "Now, there are 9,000. Sure, I could dwell on the 1,000 that I can't do. But I prefer to think about the 9,000 that are left."

Mitchell went on to become mayor of Crested Butte, Colorado, where he said he's known as the man who "saved a mountain," for the battle he led against a mining company that wanted to tear a mountain down.

La Cumbre students said they were impressed, and inspired, by Mitchell's words.

"Like he said, you don't have to be old to make a difference in your life," said Gisela Acu —a, 11, a sixth-grader who remembers feeling frustrated at times when she was learning to speak English. Now she's a straight-A honors student.

"Listening to him made me realize that if you see somebody walking down the street that's hurt, or who looks different, you should smile at them, or try to help them," said 11-year-old Shawn Adame.

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