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Students honor Reeves, creation of club

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Students gathered for a candlelight vigil Wednesday evening to honor the life of Christopher Reeves on the three-year anniversary of his death and to celebrate the creation of a Student Society for Stem Cell Research chapter at the university. The event was part of a nationwide effort on college campuses to draw attention to paralysis and stem cell research.

After lighting his candle in memory of Reeves, junior communication major Josh Basile reflected on the man he calls an inspiration.

"He was the best thing that ever happened to the spinal-chord-injury community," said Basile, who is now a national spokesman for the SSSCR. "He pretty much showed me what was possible."

Basile was paralyzed from the shoulder down in August 2004 during a family vacation in Bethany Beach, Del. While standing in the water, he remembers being picked up by a huge wave and then being "slammed headfirst" against the ocean floor, injuring his spinal chord and fracturing his fifth cervical vertebrae.

Ten months after his injury, Basile started Determined to Heal, an organization geared toward making the transition to life in paralysis easier for patients.

A strong supporter of all forms of stem cell research, Basile also saw the need for programs to help spinal chord injury patients successfully transition into a healthy everyday life and learn to cope with their current situations.

"We have to meet science halfway," he said, "which means finding new mediums for education."

In August 2007, Basile became a full-time student at the university, after transferring from Skidmore College. He decided to charter a local chapter of the SSSCR with the help of Disha Pant, a doctorate student in the department of animal and avian sciences.

"It's been a concerted effort between the two of us," said Pant, whose dissertation deals with the derivation of embryonic stem cells in cattle. "We decided to play on each other's strengths," she said, referring to her strong scientific background, and Basil's experience as a spokesperson.

"If we can derive embryonic stem cells from cattle or goats, they can serve as models for biomedical research in humans," Pant said, adding, "We're also very fortunate to live in Maryland, because Maryland is one of the few states that took initiative and provided state dollars to support stem cell

research."

In 2006, under former Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich, Maryland became one of only four states to provide funding for stem cell research, according to The Washington Post.

Basile and Pant, who were introduced to each other by the president of the SSSCR international organization, Joe Riggs, began chartering the university chapter less than a month ago. It was officially recognized by STARS as a student organization on Oct. 8.

"We hope to get students curious and interested in stem cell research," Pant said. "We want them to see it as more than just a buzzword. We want them to really understand it, believe it, and be part of the movement."

At Wednesday's vigil - which was also the club's first official meeting - students discussed their hopes for medical research.

"I believe that it could be possible in our generation that someone with spinal chord injury could walk again," Pant added. "Nothing is impossible."

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