



RICK GARGIULO PHOTOS—THE POST-STAR

Paul Gibaldi, 42, reflects on his devotion to the lord as he holds a colorfully painted crucifix given to his family as a housewarming gift when they moved to Queensbury. When Gibaldi was 23, he was in a car accident. His injuries left him in a coma, and doctors said he'd never recover. Now, he embraces life, and is an Adirondack guide and an inspirational speaker.

After a car accident that nearly killed him, an area man embraces each day.

A new life

By STACEY MORRIS
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QUEENSBURY • Paul Gibaldi was just out of college and had the dubious but common distinction of landing a job he could barely stand.

He knows his life would have continued indefinitely on an even keel of mediocrity if he hadn't nearly been killed in a car crash.

"Just existing," is how the 42-year-old described his life when it was interrupted, almost permanently, by a speeding car that ran a stop sign.

He was 23, comatose and on life support and his doctors predicted he wouldn't live through the night.

Nineteen years later, Gibaldi was in the living room and his wife, Laura, and their four daughters. He was frothing with excitement over his collection of framed photographs—scenic landscapes he captured on his visits to the farthest reaches of the Adirondacks.

The photography evolved out of a 16-year career as an Adirondack guide. His colored photographs are on the walls of every downstairs room: close-ups of barred owls, purple wildflowers and winding rivers bordered by pristine snowbanks.

When the visitor paused too long to admire a photograph of a double rainbow arcing over two deer grazing in a meadow, Gibaldi could hardly bear the leisurely pace.

"Come look at this one!" he exclaimed,

IF YOU GO

Adirondack guide and photographer Paul Gibaldi will present a slide presentation and inspirational speech at 2 p.m. March 20, at the Glen at Hiland Meadows in Queensbury. The presentation is open to the public.

Gibaldi's photographs are now on display at The Glen at Hiland Meadows through April 8. Call 812-0361 for more information.

gesturing toward an orange-hued photo of autumn foliage.

Gibaldi expresses his love of living often and easily.

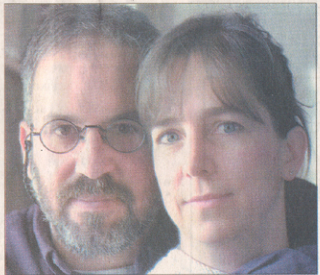
"One of my friends told me I'm transparent, that what you see is what you get," he said. "I love life ... it's a great experience."

Gibaldi wears a wood pendant of The Risen Christ that rests near his heart. Dangling beneath it is a tiny silver medallion of St. Rita—the patron saint of impossible causes.

Beautiful coma

It was January of 1984 and Gibaldi and his sister Lee had just arrived in Florida to visit their brother Joseph.

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Paul Gibaldi and his wife, Laura, live in Queensbury with their four daughters. Their love and devotion to each other, God and their family keep them strong, they say. LEFT: A wood pendant of The Risen Christ and a silver medallion of St. Rita hang around Paul Gibaldi's neck. St. Rita is the patron saint of impossible causes.



Spiritual devotion key to life

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The three were on their way to Sunday morning Mass when Joseph's car was slammed broadside at an intersection. Lee was killed instantly and Paul, who was in the back seat, was thrown through the windshield. Joseph sustained minor injuries but Paul received massive head injuries and a punctured lung.

"Being in a coma ... it was the most beautiful sense of peace and tranquility!" Gibaldi exclaimed, spreading both hands across his kitchen table. "I could hear everyone in the room, my mother, my brothers. That's why it's so important to talk to someone when they're in a coma, they can hear ... tell them you love them."

Luckily for Gibaldi, his doctors delivered their grim prognosis to his mother outside of his room.

"One doctor said, 'If it was my son, I'd pull the plug because he's going to die in the morning.' They gave me a 0 to 1 percent chance of surviving and said that if I did, I'd be a vegetable."

That's when spirituality became a permanent part of Gibaldi's life.

"I was on prayer chains all over the country," he said.

Gibaldi's mother was at his side when he came out of his coma.

"I could hardly talk, I was stuttering like crazy," he recalled. "I said, 'Mom! What happened?'"

"She told me Lee died. I don't remember what happened next but Mom said I stopped talking and tears just rolled down my face."

200 pushups

Against all medical odds, Gibaldi emerged from his

"I was so thankful to be alive, I wanted to do something for the Lord in return."

PAUL GIBALDI

local guide and inspirational speaker, on how he dedicates his life to faith

coma three months later. He'd only just begun his recovery when he left the hospital for a New York rehabilitation facility in April.

Gibaldi's gradual climb back to wholeness began with questions from his physical therapists.

"They asked me things like what 'What year is this?' 'Who is the president?'" said Gibaldi, who was in a wheelchair for two months. "The first time I took six steps on my own was a triumph."

"My physical recovery was slow, but slow progress is the best kind," he said. "And I think that spiritual growth is more important beyond the physical."

Gibaldi said his spiritual devotion is responsible for his ability to walk and talk.

"I couldn't even do a single pushup when I started ... now I do 200 every day."

He was released from rehabilitation after five months.

After several rounds of surgery that included plastic surgery to remove pieces of glass from his forehead and chin and reconstructive surgery on his knee, Gibaldi spent some time at a silent retreat, deciding what to do with his life.

A priest advised him to take on a positive endeavor rather than sit around and wait for job interviews, so Gibaldi signed on to volunteer at a Christian Appalachian Project children's camp in Kentucky.

"I was so thankful to be alive, I wanted to do something for the Lord in return," he said.

It was in Kentucky he met Laura, who was volunteering as a nurse at the camp.

"I was shy," she remembered with a smile. "I was attracted to him because he was a talker ... and he had a big, wonderful Italian family."

Laura and Paul were married two years later and relocated to the Adirondacks, where she encouraged her husband to become a guide.

"He was always hunting and fishing and hiking," Laura remembered.

"And I couldn't get a job, when people saw my resume and it said head injury and coma, they didn't want to hire me," Paul said.

He failed his first guide test and didn't wait long for a second try.

"I needed 80 out of 100 to pass," he recalled. "And I got 100."

Living faith

Growing up in Rockland County, Gibaldi attended church weekly, but never fully embraced his faith until the accident.

"Now I live it," he said, pointing to the framed words of St. Francis of Assisi on his living room wall.

"Preach the gospel always ... if necessary use words."

The visual evidence of Gibaldi's faith is everywhere.

Pictures of Jesus plaster his black briefcase; in the kitchen is an 8-by-10 cloth that reads "God is Love"; and around the corner in the foyer is a tabletop statue of The Infant Jesus of Prague, symbolic of the strength to submit to God's

will.

He took a colorfully painted cross down from the wall and stared at it.

"This is my inner peace," he said. "And it doesn't matter if you say God or Jehovah or The Great Creator ... we're all on the same team."

No inhibitions

Looking back, Gibaldi doesn't mind exchanging one life for the other.

"I was very unhappy with my job in sales ... basically I was just existing," he said.

"The Lord spared me from all that. I wasn't supposed to live through the night. Now everything I do is bonus points in a game of pinball ... I'm living the bonus round."

And after 16 years as a guide, Gibaldi said the time feels right to expand his career to include motivational speaking.

For years, he had given slide presentations at schools, colleges, libraries and state agencies.

"I love speaking; I have no inhibitions," Gibaldi said.

"Enthusiasm was brought out in me slowly after the accident," Gibaldi said.

"When someone signs up for my guide services and asks me what they should bring, I tell them, an enthusiastic heart."

"As a nurse, I know how rare it is for people with head injuries to come back the way Paul has," Laura said. "Some of the patients who were in rehab with him are still in nursing homes."

Gibaldi, who has a number of speaking engagements lined up for the spring, said his presentations are tailored to the interests of each individual audience, but he has a central message.

"Life is such a precious gift and we're only here for a short time."