

# *Awake in Philly*

## *Community Education Group*

**Publisher of *The Sleep-e Times***

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## *Waking up to sleep disorder*

**By Elizabeth Stieber**  
**Times Staff Writer**

Dave Jackson could almost drive from Champaign, Ill., to Indianapolis, Ind., in his sleep. Literally.

As a commercial truck driver for more than two years, he often fell asleep at the wheel along the 126-mile route.

"I constantly fought off sleepiness, and on many occasions, I jokingly said that I drove on auto-pilot because I didn't remember driving (that stretch of road)," Jackson recalled.

What he didn't know was that he suffered from a potentially deadly disorder — one that would haunt him over the years.

As a newspaper reporter, he was fired for falling asleep at his desk for minutes at a time. Even his physicians in Illinois didn't realize Jackson's dilemma and advised him to get more sleep.

It even affected his life at home. Jackson's daughter, Michele, recalled at times being scolded by her father when, in mid-sentence, he would fall asleep.

"I thought it was normal," she recalled.

It wasn't until 1999, on New Year's Eve, that it almost took

his life. Jackson's then-girlfriend, Michele Narcavage, who's now his wife, rushed him to Frankford Hospital, Torresdale Campus, with pneumonia-like symptoms.

While Jackson was in the intensive-care unit, doctors watched his breathing flat line a number of times as he slept. After a week in the hospital, Jackson spoke with a doctor, unaware that he'd already met the doctor and talked with him throughout the week.

The pneumonia was brought on by post-nasal drip caused by obstructive sleep apnea. The diagnosis finally explained Jackson's years of sleep problems.

In fact, about 92,000 people in Philadelphia exhibit symptoms of the disorder — and don't even know it.

People with sleep apnea often struggle with a plethora of sleep problems, including daytime sleepiness, dozing off at inappropriate times, waking up with a snort, restlessness during sleep, interruptions in breathing for 10 seconds or longer during sleep, falling asleep while driving, and depression.

Jackson wanted to help those who have been diagnosed with

sleep apnea, as well as those who may not know they have it.

In April 2000, he, his wife and his 16-year-old daughter started a support group called Awake in Philly.

The organization has since grown to become a community education outlet that addresses sleep disorders. Awake in Philly provides information about these disorders via its Web site and handouts and holds monthly meetings on sleep-disorder topics.

"We take the information and message about the true dangers of sleep disorders and sleep deprivation to the public, health-care providers and government officials," Jackson said.

The group also initiated the Senate-approved resolution that has proclaimed both Pennsylvania Sleep Awareness Week and Sleep Apnea Awareness Day for the past three years. Both events occurred last week, with Pennsylvania Sleep Apnea Awareness Day observed on April 9.

This year, Mayor John Street also proclaimed the awareness day in Philadelphia. That inspired Awake in Philly to invite Dr. Charles Cantor, medical di-

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rector of the Penn Sleep Centers and the Pennsylvania Hospital Sleep Disorder Center, as guest speaker at its meeting last Wednesday.

Cantor's lecture, Sleep Disorder Symptoms Unraveled, focused on identifying sleep disorders.

The brain functions in three stages: awake; REM (rapid eye movement) or active dreaming sleep; and non-REM or deep sleep, Cantor explained.

"These three functions of the brain have some overlap when we get into the subject of sleep disorders," he said. "People who have disorders who are excessively sleepy may be simultaneously awake and partially asleep."

To recognize a sleep disorder, Cantor recommends asking yourself three questions: Are you sleepy during the day? How well do you sleep? Do you experience any unusual events during sleep?

A particularly key question — Do you fall asleep by accident? — is an obvious clue that a person may have a sleep disorder, Cantor said.

There is no cure for sleep apnea, but there are ways to control it.

Every night, Jackson, a 38-year-old Bell's Corner resident, has to wear a mask connected to a C-PAP machine, a device that acts like a ventilator by providing constant air flow to keep his airway open, preventing apneas. Sleep-apnea sufferers also go to therapy, use airway devices and can even have surgery, depending on the severity of the disorder.

Jackson's sleep apnea has led to other medical problems at-

tributed to the disorder, including asthma and congestive heart failure, causing him to rely on Social Security disability benefits.

Although his case is severe, Jackson considers himself an example that sleep disorders should be diagnosed earlier to prevent such future problems.

Cantor promotes early detection, too.

"If you have a sleep problem, go see your doctor," Cantor said. "Don't assume that he or she doesn't care, and don't assume that it's normal that you're doing something weird at night, or if you can't stay awake during the daytime and you can't sleep at night."

"The whole process of bringing sleep disorders into the light, so to speak, is going to be a combined process of what the public does and what the medical profession does."

Jackson's sleep apnea is now under control.

"Now that my apnea is successfully being treated with a positive airway pressure device, I don't suffer those bouts of falling asleep while driving," Jackson said. "I wake in the morning feeling refreshed, which is something that I've never felt in my life." ••

The next Awake in Philly meeting will be 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 14, in the conference room of the Northeast Regional Library, 2228 Cottman Ave. For more information, visit the Web site at [www.awakeinphilly.org](http://www.awakeinphilly.org) or contact Dave Jackson by e-mail at [PhillyAwake@scoop0901.net](mailto:PhillyAwake@scoop0901.net)

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