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MIAMI BEACH

## **Paraplegic strives to save others from similar injury**

A Miami Beach woman paralyzed in an accident 12 years ago is now advocating on behalf of stem cell research.

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At her Miami Beach home, Sabrina Cohen designs graphics for her one-woman advertising agency. She uses her knuckles to type on her laptop.

Twelve years ago, Cohen was paralyzed in a drag-racing incident on Alton Road, leaving her in a wheelchair with only the smallest movement in her arms.

Since then, she has struggled to accept her injury, graduate from college and start her own business. Now she has a new challenge: advocating stem cell research.

"There's a reason I'm in this wheelchair," Cohen said. ``And I finally found it."

Today, Cohen, 26, who is volunteer public relations director for the Coral Gables-based Genetics Policy Institute, will host her first private fundraiser for research on stem cells, the body's basic building blocks that scientists believe can be used to repair organs or treat some diseases and spinal chord injuries. The research has been controversial for some religious conservatives because human embryos are used, and destroyed, in the process.

Cohen and other advocates, though, believe the research opens doors to the possibility of extending or improving lives.

In June, Cohen will fly to New York to attend a United Nations conference that will address the topic.

"I want to spread awareness and promote a cause I believe in 100 percent," Cohen said.

Cohen's injuries are a result of a Halloween 1992 outing. Then 14, she and four of her friends went out for the night in cars with two men Cohen had never met. The men began to drag-race faster than 90 mph down Alton Road. The competing car crashed into the BMW in which Cohen was riding, without a seat belt. Cohen's friends walked away with minor injuries.

"It was very difficult. I was a swimmer and I was two months away from turning 15, and I came back to school in a wheelchair accompanied by a nurse," Cohen said. ``I was obsessed with working out and maintaining my therapy and studying. It was an

eye-opener."

Cohen was paralyzed, but after five surgeries regained some movement in her arms.

She graduated from Miami Beach High with the Principal's Cup, a top honor, and lived in the dorms at the University of Miami, where she graduated with a degree in advertising and psychology. She interned for Fallon Worldwide, an advertising company in Minneapolis, and completed the copywriter program at the Miami Ad School in 2002.

"I've always been very focused -- school came first," she said. "People often say I'm an overachiever."

Now she works on her business, works out on a stationary bike that moves her legs for her and occasionally gives lectures at area schools like her alma mater, Beach High.

She urges students to wear seat belts and consider the consequences of their actions.

"I've been hurt for almost 12 years, and it's a tool to educate others," she said. "I hope they learn from me and I can save someone else."

The support from her family -- mom Evelyne, father Jack and brother David -- has made all the difference, she said.

Cohen's mom supports her daughter's efforts to advocate stem cell research.

"This has opened our eyes to hope and many things ahead for her," Evelyne Cohen said, holding back tears.