

# Local activist speaks about concussions

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Meagan Mormile/ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR

Ray Ciancaglini (above) is a local activist and retired boxer. He spoke to nearly 200 Brockport students about concussion awareness and prevention Monday, April 14. Ciancaglini heads an awareness group known as The Second Impact

After several weeks of delay, the College at Brockport's athletic training education program (ATEP) in conjunction with the New York State Athletic Training Association (NYSATA) brought local activist and retired boxer Ray Ciancaglini to speak about a topic Ciancaglini holds very close to his heart and his brain: concussion awareness and prevention. Ciancaglini spoke to a packed Edwards Hall Gold Room with nearly 200 students, athletes and instructors in attendance Monday, April 14.

Ciancaglini was meant to speak in March, which is both athletic training month and brain awareness month, but had to be rescheduled several times due to timing conflicts.

Ciancaglini heads the awareness group The Second Impact, a group endorsed by NYSATA, that exists solely to raise awareness and spread information for the prevention and treatment of concussions and related illnesses and injuries. The second impact is also a term used to describe the affliction brought about by two concussions happening within quick succession of each other, the same affliction that caused Ciancaglini's downward spiral.

"An old fight promoter pulled some strings and got me into Eastman-Kodak in the research department in the lab," Ciancaglini said. "I was doing fairly well, but several years later I developed hand tremors and I started dropping chemicals. Then the dementia and forgetfulness worsened and I was forgetting important segments of my job ... I was diagnosed with permanent brain damage brought about by untreated concussions related to boxing. Unfortunately, I was then forced to retire at the young age of 44."

Ciancaglini drew upon a decade-long boxing career that led to 40 plus years of lasting neurological damage in the form of Parkinson's disease and chronic traumatic encephalopathy or Pugalistica. This combination of neurological disorders leaves Ciancaglini in a state of dementia that makes him forgetful. He said he has "good days and bad days," but Brockport students were in luck when Ciancaglini said "thankfully, I'm really firing today."

"Resiliency and determination defined both my success and my demise as a boxer," Ciancaglini, a member of the Rochester Boxing Hall of Fame, said. "And it is those same attributes that define and drive me today."

From the start Ciancaglini, still broad and stone-handed despite being 63 years old, made it known that, despite his misfortunes, he still encourages young people to participate in all sports, boxing included, as long as they make sure to take care of any warning signs to a concussion and have it treated immediately.

"The game you sit out today may be the career you have tomorrow," Ciancaglini said.

For Ciancaglini, his battle with concussions and its lasting effects started early on in life. By the time he was 14, he had started to train to be a boxer and when he was a junior in high school he was a rising star in the local boxing scene.

"Boxing is a brutal and demanding sport that taught me life lessons about character, humility and work ethic," Ciancaglini said. "I experienced the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

But not too long into his career, when things seemed to be going his way, Ciancaglini received a right hook to the back of his head that changed his life forever.

"As a junior in high school I had everything going for me," Ciancaglini said. "As a boxer, they had projected me with a bright future in the ring. One night, during the third round during a bout at Memorial Auditorium in Buffalo, I caught a right hook to the back of my head ... my vision became blurred and my hearing was impaired. The crowd noise fluctuated from loud to muffled and back to loud again. I had never experienced this feeling before but I fought through and won a unanimous decision."

To Ciancaglini, this same determination and grit he possessed that allowed him to fight through these injuries are exactly the same reasons why young athletes today are plagued with brain injuries brought about by concussion-related incidents. He went on to insist athletes who experience any symptoms associated with concussions to immediately seek medical attention from their doctor or athletic trainer.

"Safety is always a priority with us for our student athletes," Athletic Director Erik Hart, whose wife Kristy holds office within NYSATA, said. "It's easy to hear the message from me or their head coach, but when you bring somebody in from outside it helps make the message more clear."

Ciancaglini will be delivering the keynote address at the Brain Injury Association of New York State annual event in Albany this June. Aside from speaking, Ciancaglini works with professors and researchers to further build the base of knowledge about concussions and the ailments surrounding them. Ciancaglini has even gone as far as to donate his brain to the researchers at Boston University after his death.

"When I expire, they're going to need a jackhammer getting into this one," he said, laughing and tapping the side of his head. "They contacted me to have my brain donated upon my death. I don't want to use the word 'honored', but I am. I want to help out as much as I can and I believe they're top of the line and for that I couldn't be any more grateful."