

INTERVIEWER: A lot of Minnesotans have followed the story of Jack Jablonski. He was the high school hockey player from Saint Louis Park who's become an advocate for folks with spinal cord injuries after suffering one himself during a high school hockey game back in 2011. He became paralyzed from the chest down from that injury. Today he leads the Jack Jablonski Foundation, a charitable organization he created a year after his accident to advance paralysis recovery treatments through research.

He's also busy with his career as the digital media content specialist for the Los Angeles Kings NHL team. And last week, he announced on social media that he is gay. We wanted to talk to Jack about his announcement, so he is on the line. Jack Jablonski, welcome to Minnesota Now. How have you been?

JACK I'm doing well. Good to talk to you again.

JABLONSKI:

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. Likewise. What can of response have you received since you came out last week?

JACK It's been overwhelming in the best way possible. I've been so thankful for all the positive responses on social
JABLONSKI: media and personal messages. And it's-- again, it's been bottled up for quite a while, but at the same time, it's all been worth it since I've had the opportunity to come out and be who I am publicly.

INTERVIEWER: I'm glad to hear that. As you know, the sports world isn't terribly welcoming to gay male athletes, especially in high school. As you started to question your sexuality when you're younger, how did that culture and what you know of it bump up against your inner struggle?

JACK Well, for me, I didn't realize who I was until a little bit later in life, but during my high school experience, it was
JABLONSKI: just conflicting, because you look back and you have hindsight 20/20, and for me, you can kind of put the pieces together of when things started, and that did include being in high school. And it was one of those things where it just they were two separate worlds for me. And I didn't understand how they could go together, mostly because of the way that I was just around in terms of life.

But at the same time, it definitely was conflicting. And I'm thankful that to this point now, it's getting to become a little bit more acceptable. But at the same time, it's two things that still need to kind of work their way together.

INTERVIEWER: I'm wondering, I read the really excellent article about you in "The Athletic." How was the pandemic lockdown a turning point for you?

JACK Yeah, well, I think for many people when you're by yourself or you don't have much going on, your mind can kind
JABLONSKI: of do its own thing, or the truth, or the realization of a lot of things can kind of happen. And for me with my injury, I've always been focused on staying busy to avoid kind of being alone or have my mind race because it can often go in a dark hole with paralysis and the realization of what life holds at times.

For me, I didn't fully realize my sexuality until COVID hit because that was when I was alone by myself. I had moved to a new city after graduating from college in LA, and that's when it all kind of just clicked. And for me, in many ways, I'm glad it clicked because I was finally able to get to the point where I am now, and that's being out and proud.

But at the same time, that was also the start of the dark days because of the realization of who I really was and what it was going to take for me to become happy with who I was. And COVID definitely was the beginning of that and it went down a dark road for a little while. But I'm here to tell the story, and I'm happy with who I am and where I am.

INTERVIEWER: And do you feel lighter in a sense?

JACK JABLONSKI: So much. Yes, so much lighter. It was such a relief being able to have the opportunity to tell my story and not hide in the shadows, because for me, it was something that ate me up inside. And at the end of the day, now being able to have everyone know, but just be able to go out and be myself is what's so important and so healthy for me mentally. And anyone else who's been through this process can relate.

INTERVIEWER: So I want to ask you about something else. A freshman, as you know, at Bloomington Jefferson injured his spinal cord during a football game earlier this month, actually last week. What insights can you offer that young man and others going through that very difficult experience?

JACK JABLONSKI: Yeah, absolutely. I know my family's been in touch with his family, Ethan, and obviously, I will be as well. As that process continues, most importantly, you want to give space when it's needed, and everyone handles it differently in terms of the process of grievance, and reality, and then understanding the future.

But most importantly life isn't over after you have a spinal cord injury. There's so much to live for. There's so much that you can accomplish in terms of a career, but most importantly happiness. And right now is such a vital time to focus on yourself and focus on recovery because with spinal cord injuries, that immediate rehab and understanding some of the goals that you need to start setting and hopefully can focus on is extremely important at this stage.

And first off, I wish Ethan and his family nothing but the best. And I hope to be able to be a part of his life in terms of just helping be an asset and a resource towards hopefully living a great life.

INTERVIEWER: With my best 30 seconds left here, I know you're coming back for your Jablonski Foundation Gala October 15 at the River Center, right?

JACK JABLONSKI: Correct. Yes. We have the annual gala for the Jackson Jablonski Foundation. We raise money for spinal cord injury research. We've made significant progress, raising well over \$3 million in the 9 years of existence. And we look forward to continuing that. And for anyone interested in the gala or the information of what we do, you can go to JablonskiFoundation.org.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. Jack, it's so good to hear your voice again. Thank you so much. Best of luck.

JACK JABLONSKI: Thank you so much. And I appreciate you letting me tell my story.

INTERVIEWER: Take care of yourself. Jack Jablonski, he works for the LA Kings hockey team. He leads the Jack Jablonski Foundation.