

HEALTH &amp; WELL-BEING

# A.W.A.K.E. and INVOLVED

## The Leyden Team

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

**M**ichael Leyden tells the story of a sailing trip he took with a group of friends. Anchored off Mystic, Connecticut, for the night, “there were four people on-board when I went to sleep, but when I got up the next morning, everyone was gone. They had rowed the dinghy ashore and slept in the boathouse.” Anything to get away from his thunderous snoring.

Michael, 47, says he’s had sleep apnea as long as he can remember, though it wasn’t until 1999 that he found out something could be done to help. Before that, he sleepwalked through his days because he awakened countless times each night. His wife, Deirdre, insists she didn’t get a decent night’s sleep during the first nine years of their marriage.

Sleep apnea (SA) is a common, but dangerous condition in which a person stops breathing while asleep. It can happen hundreds of times a night and last a few seconds or for a minute or more. The most common type – obstructive sleep apnea, or OSA – occurs when the airway is blocked by soft tissue structures at the back of the throat that collapse as the body relaxes during sleep. Typically, the brain sends a “wake-up call” when it senses an insufficient supply of oxygen. The resulting oxygen deficit and nightlong wake-sleep-wake pattern have serious health consequences. These range from high blood pressure and other heart and circulatory problems to impaired memory, altered mood, and inability to concentrate. Recently, researchers have found a link between OSA and type 2 diabetes and have tied SA-related memory loss to oxygen-starvation of cells in the brain’s memory centers. SA is a major contributing factor in workplace and



car accidents.

An estimated 12 million people in the U.S. suffer from some form of SA. Those at highest risk are male, overweight, and middle-aged or older, but women, children, and people whose weight is normal may also have it. The American Sleep Apnea Association Web site features a quiz, “What’s Your Snore Score,” which points to some of the warning signs, including feeling groggy on waking and sleepy throughout the day. Snoring is a common feature, but not everyone who snores has SA and not everyone with SA snores. Fortunately, doctors are more aware of SA than they have been in the past, when it was rarely considered a cause of “chronic fatigue” or sleeping problems. Still, people who think they might have SA should bring it up if their doctor does not.

How does one go about getting diagnosed and, more importantly, treated for SA? Michael, a tinkerer at heart, took a do-it-yourself approach. He rigged up a video camera on a tripod and videotaped himself sleeping. When he watched the tape the next morning, he was aghast. “I’m in pain. I’m rolling all over the place.” He remembers thinking, “I don’t look like I’m breathing. How could I possibly be surviving like this?” He made an appointment with his primary care physician, who sent him to the sleep lab at Falmouth Hospital, one of two such

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MERRILY LUNSFORD/CAPE COD TIMES

**Michael and Deirdre Leyden are coordinators of the Cape Cod A.W.A.K.E. program, which helps people learn to deal with sleep apnea. The condition is detrimental to the sufferer’s health – and his or her spouse’s patience. Neither one ever gets a full night’s rest.**

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## Awake

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facilities on the Cape. The other is Coastal Sleep Diagnostics in Hyannis.

A sleep study involves an overnight stay to monitor a range of factors, from brain waves and heart rhythm to movements of the eyes and limbs, breathing rate, blood oxygen level, and blood pressure. Michael's diagnosis came as no surprise. The tossing and turning caught on his home video was confirmed by more scientific measurements, including 160 wakeups over the course of three hours and an oxygen saturation level of 60 percent, dangerously below the 90- to 98-percent normal range. The solution? A continuous positive air pressure machine, or CPAP, which delivers a steady stream of room air through his nose, acting as a "splint" to keep his airway open and his breathing steady.

The first time Michael tried the machine, he got six hours of uninterrupted sleep, probably more than he'd ever had in his life. "I felt superhuman. I could actually remember things. I was energetic. I couldn't believe how good I felt," he recalls.

That experience and a desire to help others motivated him and Deirdre to become coordinators of Cape Cod A.W.A.K.E, the local chapter of the American Sleep Apnea Association (ASAA) support network. A.W.A.K.E. stands for Alert, Well, And Keeping Energetic, characteristics that are uncommon in people with untreated sleep apnea, according to ASAA. The group meets every other month at the Yarmouth Senior Center, with expert speakers and plenty of peer support.

Members are valuable resources for others in the group, Deirdre says. "At every meeting, I say 'There's somebody in this room that has been through what you're going through.' It's important for people who have or suspect they may have sleep apnea to have a place to go and get answers."

Although there are other approaches – ranging from changing sleep position and weight loss to custom-fitted mouth appliances and surgery – CPAP is "the gold standard," Deirdre says. It works really well for most people, although it does take getting used to. The shoebox-size machine sits at bedside and is connected by plastic tubing to a face mask. There is a variety of mask styles and sizes. Some people try several before finding one that is

## Quickhits

### Sleep tight

American Sleep Apnea Association (ASAA)

[www.sleepapnea.org](http://www.sleepapnea.org)

ASAA online forum

<http://apneasupport.org>

Cape Cod A.W.A.K.E.

[www.leydenteam.com/cape\\_cod\\_awake.asp](http://www.leydenteam.com/cape_cod_awake.asp)

Meets: 6 - 8 p.m. every other month at the Yarmouth Senior Center 528 Forest Road, South Yarmouth  
Schedule for first half of 2009:  
Jan. 7; March 4; May 6

The Leyden Team

[www.leydenteam.com](http://www.leydenteam.com)

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508-272-3196 (mobile)

e-mail: [info@LeydenTeam.com](mailto:info@LeydenTeam.com)

right for them. Respiratory therapists and technicians at the durable medical equipment companies that rent, sell, and service CPAP machines can provide expert advice. Medicare covers a doctor-ordered sleep study and a CPAP, if SA is diagnosed. Many private insurers provide similar coverage.

Between A.W.A.K.E. meetings, Deirdre and Michael welcome telephone and e-mail inquiries. "Newly diagnosed people have a lot of questions. There's a lot to absorb, but most things – adjusting the pressure, finding a mask that fits – are easily resolved." Michael says he loves walking people through the process and he has lots of tips and tricks from his long experience with OSA.

That kind of generosity with their time and enthusiastic community involvement are what make the Leydens tick. Married in 1990, they've been a team ever since. "We seem to do everything together," says Deirdre. They are active members of the chambers of commerce in both Yarmouth, where they live, and Dennis, where their real estate business, the Leyden Team, is located. "We're entrenched. We're involved with everything down here," Michael says, ticking off the parades their float appears in – St. Patrick's Day, Brewster in Bloom, the Cranberry and Yarmouth Seaside festivals. As members of the Dennis Small Business Association, they're involved in the August Summerfest, which features a bike rodeo,

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MERRILY LUNSFORD/CAPE COD TIMES

**Michael Leyden demonstrates how to use the continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine, which is a common treatment for sleep apnea.**

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bed race, bonfire concert and fireworks on the beach, and the antique car race, which celebrated its fiftieth year this past summer. They belong to the U.S. Sail and Power Squadron, which promotes boating safety.

They spend a lot of time on their own boat, a 30-foot Express Cruiser named Waterfront Property, but Michael's pet project is the Viking Longboat race. Now in its fourth year, this competition is all fun. "The challenge is to use only cardboard, duct tape, paint, glue, and caulking to build a boat that will hold two people and race a 200-yard course before it sinks," he says. (A photo of the Leyden Team entry can be seen on their Web site.)

These days, the Leyden Team holds the number three spot in home sales among Cape realtors. Pretty impressive considering they've been in the business for only five years. They got their licenses, together, after Deirdre retired from a career in Medicare billing. For Michael, it was the next step in a series of endeavors – working as a technician for General Electric, a building contractor and service station owner, a motivational speaker, locksmith, insurance and securities salesman.

Michael has been on the Cape since 1984. Born in Boston, he spent his childhood on the move as his father was transferred all over the Northeast. Deirdre, now 52, first came to the

Cape when she was 10. When her family left Chicago to live here full-time, she attended Dennis-Yarmouth High School and 4Cs, where she got a degree in banking and finance. She went on to Bryant College, graduating with a BA in business administration, and lived for a while in Rhode Island, returning to the Cape 15 years ago. "I've been coming back here since I was 10, so even though I've lived other places, this is home."

It's a good thing Michael is taking care of his SA. Otherwise, this dynamic team would never have the energy to do all they do.

#### About the author

*Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty-nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.*

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