



In Their Own Words

Teens tell how safety belts affected their lives

Below, three young people in three places tell three very stories about one life-saving decision: wearing a safety belt. These stories can be used in speeches or passed along to the local news media to illustrate the bottom line for every mobilization – preventing deaths and injuries. They make great human-interest stories or sidebars.

“The most important thing we didn’t do ... was buckle up”

By Mary Reinhart
of Deerfield, Wisconsin

It has been almost a year now since my life was turned upside down, literally and figuratively. And it will be a long time until I forget my boyfriend and the two good friends who were in the car with me that cold December night. We were returning from a night of partying. My boyfriend Matt was driving and with him upfront was my friend Kyle. I was in the back seat with my other friend Jeremy. Yes, we were speeding and drinking – a lot of things we shouldn’t have been doing that night. The most important thing we didn’t do though was buckle up.

As we came over a hill going extremely fast, I knew this was going to be it. Jeremy and I were holding hands and he said to me, “I love you, you’re my sweetheart.” And, in that instant, I made a decision that saved my life – I buckle my safety belt. I don’t know exactly what made me do it, but I was the only one of us who did.

Matt lost control of the car and we started rolling, over and over again. When the car finally came to a stop I unbuckled myself. I was alone in the car and the engine was still running. I reached up and turned the car off and discovered we had plowed into a ditch in a frozen field on the side of the road. Out in the field I saw my boyfriend Matt. He was lying there like he was sleeping, but he wasn’t. I called to him, but he didn’t answer. I walked over and knelt beside his head and lifted it up into my hands – I could feel Matt’s life pouring away. His blood and brains collected in a pool in my palms. He was gone.

My friend Jeremy was nearby – his neck was broken. It was broken so badly it was tucked underneath his body. And finally there was Kyle, laying there covered in his own blood – gurgling in it. His eyes opened and he was staring straight at me. I put my coat over him and told him to hang on while I got help. But he wouldn’t make it either.



Strangely, in the midst of this horrific scene, I noticed that Kyle's shoes were no longer on. They had been literally ripped off his feet by the violence of the crash. That was something that really bothered me – one of those flashbulb images you never forget.

I ran to a nearby farmhouse covered in my friends' blood and called 911. But there was nothing they could do. Matt and Jeremy both died instantly – Kyle passed away soon after that at the hospital. There were three funerals that week, one after the other. A 17 year-old kid shouldn't have to be planning her boyfriend's funeral – but I did. We were together for five years. The sound of that crash will be with me a lot longer though.

When I tell this story to kids my age, I wish they could get inside my head for just one moment – just one sleepless night when the nightmares come, the nightmare that was the last time I saw my friends alive. If they could get inside my head they'd understand how terribly much I just want to go back and live that night again and make them buckle in those last moments – before the car rolled and everything went black. But I can't go back.

But there are hundreds of people out there – a lot of them just kids that still have a chance to change their fate. They don't have to end up in a ditch bleeding and gasping for their last breaths. I have to live with the memory of seeing my friends like that for the rest of my life. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think of them or all the other young people that end up like them almost every week.

There are still a lot of questions I need to answer for myself, but I come to the realization that the best I can do is live as an example for other kids like me. Kids my age don't like to hear what's good for them, but I'm trying. I'm thinking that maybe if they see me and hear me out that they'll think twice before going for a drive without putting their safety belt on.

Taken from Mary Reinhart's speech before the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services – Statewide Trauma Care System Forum, September 2003.



“I witnessed a sight I will never forget”

By Heather Hansen
of Orlando, Fla.

Sitting at a stop light, mired in a traffic jam one August afternoon, I was suddenly hit from behind, a crash that changed my life forever.

At first I didn't realize what had happened. My car wasn't facing the red light anymore. Very shaken up with a good sized bump on my head, I removed my seatbelt and ran towards the cries of my best friend. Then I witnessed a sight I will never forget, the sight of another friend lying in the backseat of the car after he was thrown from the front. Through all the smoke and shattered glass, I tried to help him.

I began to feel sick as I waited for the ambulance to arrive; it felt like I was waiting for an eternity. Watching the paramedics try to save my friend was very scary. So much chaos and sirens, yelling and crying – it all happened so fast. Things weren't going good and then we found out our friend did not make it.

My seatbelt left bruises and I received a bump on the head, but most importantly it left me a future. My friend may have been here with us today if the one thing too frequently forgotten had been remembered – his safety belt.



If I hadn't been wearing a seat belt, I wouldn't be here now.

By Rachel Benninger
at University of Virginia

I was driving my Nissan Sentra home to Roanoke after visiting a friend at James Madison University. It was a Saturday morning in September, and I was pretty tired. I had to get home because I was doing a walkathon for juvenile diabetes with my basketball team that afternoon. I was about 20 minutes away from home when I fell asleep at the wheel. When I opened my eyes, I was right behind a tractor-trailer. I ran into the back of the tractor-trailer, and the car bounced off of it and ran into the median. I blacked out, but I remember that three people had pulled over to help and a police officer asked me if I was OK. The car was totaled, but I wasn't hurt. If I hadn't been wearing a seat belt, I wouldn't be here now. And I tell my friends that wearing a seat belt really could save your life. It really makes a difference.