

It was a Thursday night when I heard the news. I thought it would be like any other Thursday night--listening to music and doing my biology homework, until my dad abruptly called me to come upstairs. Unbeknownst to me, two officers had given my father very grim news. In the most hysterical state I had ever seen him, he proceeded to tell me about my sister Leah's sudden demise. Immediately, a look of horror and shock washed over my face as I collapsed onto the floor in tears. I couldn't believe I would never see my sister again on earth. In a moment of catharsis, I proceeded to yell and ask God why such a thing could occur, while my dad circled the interior of my house frantically calling my mother and eldest sister to return home. I could feel my breath being stripped away from me the moment my sister and mom heard the words, "Leah is gone.". As more people heard the news, every day felt like a nightmare I could not awake from. The coming week after Leah's death was the hardest week of my life. I could not will myself to view Leah lifeless body because I wanted to remember her as the lively and vivacious woman she was. The next morning hit me like bricks. Words cannot express the difficult nature of being torn away, seeing your sister's casket being lowered six feet below the ground. I would like to think that Leah doesn't remain underground. Instead she still lives in our memories, passions and every day I am blessed with. The weeks after the funeral were even more difficult. I honestly don't think I could've gotten through them without my eldest sister Rebecca and my family. My heart still and will continue to hurt because of Leah's death, but I am also grateful for the amazing seventeen years I had with her.

My beautiful sister Leah was born on February 12, 1996, as the second child of three in my family. Looking back, Leah had always influenced me and I always aspired to be like her. She was one semester on her way to graduating in Civil Engineering with a minor in mathematics at West Virginia University. Throughout her childhood and her transition from

adolescence to adulthood, Leah had always worked hard and succeeded in school. She was a member of the National Honors Society in high school and the Dean's List at WVU. However, Leah's passions were not just confined to academics but she also loved the outdoors and music. Leah's bond with music is what eventually grew my love towards music and completed our sibling three part harmony. Despite how different each of us are, music was always our commonality and something we loved to do that we could enjoy with each other. Leah was never afraid to be "different" and encouraged me to never sell myself short. She saw the beauty in authenticity and made people around her feel proud to be who they are. She had such an effervescent personality that made each person she met love her instantly. The overwhelming amount of outreach from the community surrounding her death shows that Leah touched more lives than even she knew. She wasn't just my hero.

On February 1, 2018 at around 6:40 p.m. Leah was tragically struck while lawfully crossing the pedestrian crosswalk located at the Patteson Drive intersection in Morgantown, West Virginia. The driver was reported to have been speeding and ran the light after it was red. The collision was so powerful that my sister had immediately died without any chance of survival when airlifted to Ruby Memorial Hospital.

The Center of Disease Control (CDC) defines distracted driving as *anything that prevents attention on the road*. This was clearly the case when this reckless driver neglected everything in front of her and hit my sister Leah. There are three main types of distracted driving: visual, manual and cognitive. According to the National Center for Statistics (NCSA), distracted driving deaths and injuries in 2015 were 3,477 and 391,000 and continue to increase. Surrounding this accident, I have heard a lot about educating pedestrians to be mindful; however, I find that this is greater than just cautionary education. Leah waited until the crosswalk signaled her to go, she

was not distracted by her phone while walking and was wearing a white colored cardigan, easy to be seen in the dark night. She did everything she was supposed to, and still lost her life. Since this event, my family and I have sought out justice and change by attending monthly Safety Pedestrian Board meetings in addition to our pursuance of litigation. Prevention is the best mechanism we have to stop any other family from having to deal with the loss of a loved one. The young woman who killed my sister faces a misdemeanor, a statute of the law upheld by many other states. Negligent homicide has become the loose fitting punishment that neither deters nor improves national statistics. I believe a place that we can start to implement change is by providing drivers an incentive to actually drive carefully, or at least a deterrence factor to not drive recklessly. Individuals who know there is a consequence for disregarding the law will at least think twice before doing it, especially younger drivers. Another area of change is improving the traffic signaling of pedestrian crosswalks in accordance with the traffic lights. Densely populated areas use more advanced and delayed light signaling to ensure a lesser chance of any collision. I would encourage further pedestrian safety education for incoming drivers and continual education for current drivers. Driving under the influence has been highly publicized in the last two decades due to many fatalities and that is something that also needs to be done for distracted driving. If people are more aware of the damage distracted driving can do, not only to victims but also to victim's families, then perhaps they would be more attentive when getting behind the wheel.

That day will forever haunt my memory because I lost not only a sister, but a best friend. And every day I will forever miss my big sister. Leah was outspoken, bold and had a voice of her own--and unfortunately now cannot be here to tell her story. **So I will.** I will use my voice to share Leah's story and fight to let people know the cost of reckless driving. Leah had so much of

her life to live and now her life should be used as a testimony to send a message. In efforts to stand up for the lives that have been lost to this, I vow to stand up against distracted driving.

Modern American writer Margaret Mead once said, *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has..”*

So, who's with me?