

When we think of distracted drivers we constantly focus on young people and their cell phones, checking snapchat messages or how many likes their picture got on Instagram. My experiences have been different than many of my classmates and I have a different approach to distracted driving as others may have. I have been in the foster-care system since seventh grade and have attended school in three different school districts. In a few years' time, I bounced from living with my biological family, to seven different foster homes in total. As I have matured, I have tried to maintain and continue healthy relationships with my biological family members. In November of 2018, I had an opportunity to go visit my aunt out of state in Utah, which required a plane ride. It was my first time flying and I was a little nervous. The day I needed to catch my flight, my current foster parents were unable to take off work to make the trip to the airport, so my biological grandmother offered to make the trip and take me to the airport. The dynamics of my relationship with my grandmother and the rest of my biological family are very strange due to the circumstances and our times together often were awkward. I was willing to push past the discomfort to get a ride to the airport, and maybe do some catching up with my grandmother too. She picked me up at four a.m. to drive me to the Pittsburgh Airport to catch my 7 am flight. During the hour and a half car ride I started becoming more and more uncomfortable; Not for the pending air flight, but for the way we were driving down the highway. My grandmother reeked of liquor and what she had been sipping from her coffee cup that early morning, was not coffee. She also was constantly checking her cellphone to make sure she was headed in the right direction, which was a combination destined for disaster.

I was scared for my safety, but mostly scared for my, at the time, seven-year-old brother in the back seat who came along for the ride. I spent numerous years being responsible for

myself and my brothers but at this time, sitting stagnant in the passenger seat, I had no control for any of our safety. Through all my tragedies, growing up surrounded by drug addiction and alcoholism, I have had to grow up fast and make instant decisions that would positively impact my life. So- during that trip, I made a difficult decision and demanded my grandmother pull over. I begged and argued with her for minutes until she finally, but reluctantly, pulled off the interstate. Although only having a learner's permit, I knew I needed to take this situation into my own hands. I drove the three of us the remainder of the way to the airport. It was my first time driving on the interstate and driving long distance, but I knew anything was better than letting my grandmother drive under the influence. Although relieved we made it there, I was hesitant and terrified of getting on that plane. I felt that letting my brother go back home with my intoxicated distracted grandmother was the worst decision I could have made. Luckily that morning, I got on the plane, and they made it home with no issue. Graciously, her decisions did not hurt any of us that morning, but a year later though, her irresponsibility, distraction, and drinking problem lead to my now eight-year old brother's death when he came to visit her for Easter Break.

Growing up around addicts, I have been in cars with people who were under the influence of all sorts of substances. To prevent situations like I was in that night on the way to the airport, numerous situations that I was succumbed in growing up, and prevent deaths like my brothers, I will spend my life and career creating awareness that drug use and alcoholism is a dangerous form of distracted driving, other than the obvious and most thought of- cell phone usage. Going to college at the University of Charleston, I will study the law and work my way into law school so I can have direct impact and work towards fixing major flaws in our society, especially in West Virginia. I am very passionate about foster care reform and I believe

that all these situations are intertwined completely - drug addiction, alcoholism, distracted driving, the foster system. If parts of these issues are resolved many other things will fall in line. Kids will be less exposed to dangers of parents distracted driving, whether distracted by drugs, alcohol, cell phones, etc. I believe getting drug addiction under control will lead to less distracted driving and less children landing in the graces of the flawed foster system. I want people of all ages to realize that distracted driving is more than checking a text; It is also emotional driving and driving under the influence. People of all ages need to be aware that distracted driving is not okay, and they should stand up and speak out if something they do not like is happening around them- even if it is your friends or family. It is imperative that children grow up to understand the importance of safe and undistracted driving and that just because they've grown up around irresponsible behavior, does not mean they need to contribute and continue that behavior.

That one early morning is one I will never forget and not for the right reasons. It has solidified my need to be a positive citizen and help others to become positive and productive citizens. I have learned what not to do by experiencing the results of wrong decisions being made by adults most of my life. I want to be the change and hope be a role model for others to follow.