I received the news late on Saturday night. I walked down my soft, carpeted steps to meet my family in the living room. My black and yellow plaid pajama pants sat comfortably around my waist while my peel-off face-mask dried. I could never have guessed what my mom told me next.

Through tears, sniffles and the muffled sound of my aunt on her speakerphone, my mom managed to make out the news that my cousin had been involved in a brutal car accident. His silver mini-van flipped twice on the highway and left his 17-year-old body hanging upside down in a field. He was joined by his best friend. By sheer luck, their young skin was only marked by mere scratches.

However, the lack of physical damage could not make up for the emotional trauma that that night presented. On top of the financial struggle that the crash presented, my cousin feared the road for weeks. Panic attacks ensued when he tried get in the car because he continually feared for his life. This trickled down to anxiety for my mom and then for me. Every time I turned my key into ignition, I thought for a second about what could go wrong. A left turn was now a chance to be hit. A right turn was a chance to end up on the curb. Though I never stopped driving, I constantly feared the possibility that I could end up like my cousin.

Then, for the first time, I wondered "What caused the crash?"

I had never thought about it. I once again walked nervously to my mom to question what happened. She told me that no other car had been involved in the accident. My face immediately changed. She continued by explaining that he was distracted by both his friend and his phone, missed his exit and then tried to get over too quickly. His car couldn't take the speed and it flipped. I was shocked. I thought that some other car had caused the accident. I never could have pictured that he caused the trauma that he felt. I then questioned if I had ever made a similar

mistake on the road and by luck I was saved from an accident. I had missed an exit before. I had

payed too much attention to my friends while on the road. I had looked at my phone screen one

too many times while behind the wheel. My fate could have been like my cousin's. So from that

day on, I vowed to become more conscious of every move I made in the car.

From looking at my phone to change the music, to picking up large groups of people; I

decided that I needed to set boundaries in the car. I would still take the same amount of people,

but I would force myself to tell them when I was uncomfortable with the volume in the vehicle. I

decided to make sure I liked my music playlist before put my car in drive, to limit how distracted

I was. These may seem simple, but they were big steps in stopping my distracted nature on the

road.

I also pushed myself to tell my friends when I was uncomfortable with their driving

habits and to assist them so they don't feel they need to make unsafe choices. I refused to let

them drive me if they intended on texting, and I offered to respond to their texts and calls if need

be. I also took control go the GPS system so that they would not be confused on the road, as my

cousin was.

Though the steps that I took individually to stop distracted driving in my life wont

necessarily impact the larger population of driving teens, I hope that my small changes have

pushed others around me to think about their driving habits. I believe that if one person makes a

change, it has the ability to slowly impact the masses. I also think there are a lot of technological

advances that could assist teens and even adults with distracted driving. If cars receive the ability

to use hands-free bluetooth and GPS installed into the car, people will look less towards their

phones and will be able to hear what they need while still seeing the road. However, this

technology does not come cheap. Many are not able to afford the new advances that help

distracted driving. So, the real change needs to come through awareness. Signs, posters and videos detailing the negative impacts of distracted driving need to be shared. It is important that everyone on the road knows the power they have to control someones life when they get behind the wheel.

I know that stopping distracting driving will take a lot of effort. It is not a problem that can be fixed simply. However, my cousin's accident made me think about the things I can do to make sure that I don't put myself and the ones around me in danger. That small step could change lives. I advise everyone to try to make that small change.