

My mom, like most moms, is a pro at assigning chores. Most of these I don't mind too much: changing the cat litter is easy, taking out the trash is painless, and scrubbing the tub is fairly quick. But sometimes, she asks my sister and I to join her in scouring the web to look for articles of interest to teens. She's a high school teacher, and she uses the articles to inspire journal writing or class discussions. I've found a few gems over the years, like articles covering new Snapchat filters, part-time jobs, the rise of adolescent veganism, and the return of "mom jeans." But over winter break a couple of months ago, I found an article on distracted driving that really affected me. Though I passed it along to my mom, I also printed a copy for myself, and it's still on my bulletin board. It reminds me daily of how truly dangerous and life-altering distracted driving can be.

The December 2019 article, by Randy Ludlow of *The Columbus Dispatch*, covered Ohio governor Mike DeWine's proposal to make distracted driving a primary offense in Ohio in order to lessen the number of accidents and deaths caused by cellphone-using drivers. Though there were plenty of sobering statistics (like 8200 distracted driving violations, 51 deaths, 7000 injuries and 14,000 crashes over the past year), what really affected me the most was a paragraph that embedded an indelible image in my mind: that of a man named Terry Dawson, whose family gathered on the side of a Licking County road in 2017 to pray over the tangled mass of twisted metal left behind after his mother-in-law's mini-van was hit by a driver who had been looking at her cellphone. His mother-in-law died, and her death was on Christmas Eve.

I immediately imagined what it would be like to stare at the wreckage of an accident that claimed the life of my mom, or my sister, or my grandparents. On a night where others were sipping hot chocolate, opening stockings, or watching holiday movies, Terry Dawson's family was saying goodbye to a loved one, and I just couldn't imagine doing that. By the same token, I

can't imagine putting my mom in that position, one where she'd lose me. Though I had already committed to being a safe and attentive driver, I decided to double down and completely reject any involvement with distracted driving.

Since I've had my license, I've been in plenty of situations where distracted driving has been evident. I've seen friends check texts, hunt for playlists on their phones, or check out an Instagram post. Though I've been good about leaving my phone untouched, I've made poor choices myself that have diverted my attention from the road- rifling through the glove box, changing a radio station, or sifting through the center console for a pen or a pair of sunglasses. I was even involved in a fender bender this past year when I foolishly fiddled with dash buttons to try to defrost my windows instead of pulling over and safely making the needed adjustments. But after I read that article, I became much more vigilant. I used to bite my tongue and not say anything to my friends when they turned their focus to their phones, figuring it was better to be quiet than to be the passenger seat "policeman," but every time I think of that praying family on a lonely road on Christmas Eve, I decide that silence is irresponsible and selfish.

While I think that preventing distracted driving starts with people and their willingness to speak up and set an example, I believe there are other things we can do as a society to curtail this problem. House Bill 468 would be a good start, as it would make distracted driving a primary offense throughout Ohio, as opposed to a secondary offense where tickets could only be issued if a driver was stopped for another offense like speeding. Laws are good for curbing behavior, but a culture change would be even better, and culture changes start with education.

There are many ways we can educate people, especially teens, about the dangers of distracted driving. School is the perfect place to drive this message home. Distracted driving simulators could be brought in to give teens virtual experiences that powerfully show us how cell

phone use can negatively impact our driving. Furthermore, displaying mangled cars on school property could send a strong message. Our school has brought in wrecked cars to demonstrate the danger of drunk driving, and those displays are tangible and potent; I think if adolescents could see what has happened to cars in distracted driving situations, the dangers would become more real and harder to ignore.

Also, understanding the emotional impact of distracted driving could really help to change people's minds and attitudes. Programs like Maria's Message (started by local news personality Dom Tiberi, who lost his daughter in a distracted driving accident) put authentic stories and situations into focus, making teens aware of what they and their families have to lose because of distractions. The pain of others is often a more effective deterrent than facts and statistics, which can sometimes seem distant and vague.

Beyond education, we can start with our own attitudes and our ability to model behavior. I try to set a good example for my younger sister, who now has her temporary license. I put my cell phone in my glove box while I'm driving. While I've told myself not to use my phone, it's still a temptation when it's sitting right next to me. By creating a little bit of distance, I make it impossible for myself to use my phone, and I hope that my choices will become my sister's choices as well. Neither of us wants our mom to that person standing on the road, looking at what's left of our car, on Christmas Eve or any other day of the year.

During the Coronavirus quarantine, I've really had a chance to think about how fragile life can be. We aren't guaranteed a tomorrow. In the case of this pandemic, many people cannot escape illness because it isn't in our control. Distracted driving- at least our disavowal of it- is in our control. We can choose not to do it to preserve life. These days of social distancing also have proven that we have the ability to slow down and step back from the fast pace of life. If the

whole country can step back and slow down for weeks, maybe even months, then certainly we can step away from our devices during our time in the car. There is no response to a text that can't wait until we reach our destination. Sometimes when the world is spinning out of control, as it seems to be right now during this COVID-19 crisis, we need to harness the things that are in our control and can help secure the safety of ourselves and our community. By committing to driving without distraction, we can make a choice that benefits everyone.