

June 7th, 2019. It was a regular sunshine filled summer day, which also happened to be National Donut Day! My little brothers and I enjoyed a fun morning together sampling donuts from local donut shops. Our drive home was familiar and uneventful, until five miles from our house.

A bulky, rust covered work truck suddenly rolled through a stop sign and pulled out directly in front of me. My awareness heightened and I intuitively slowed down. The driver continued along seemingly unfazed, but I remained acutely alert as we continued down the two lane country road. A few moments passed and he began to slow down. The truck's right rear taillight was out so when the driver pumped his brakes, it appeared to me as a blinking left turn signal. I slowed down further, increasing the distance between us. Abruptly, the truck came to a complete stop in the middle of the road just before a curve. I stopped as well, immediately going from 15 miles per hour to zero with at least two car lengths between us. I expected the driver to make a left turn into the nearby driveway. Instead, and without warning, the driver threw his truck into reverse. This left me with little time or choice other than to lay on my horn, hoping he would hear me and stop. It seemed like a slow motion movie. I watched his truck back directly into the front end of my car. Instantly, I felt the seatbelt tighten against my racing heart, my breathing became heavy and loud, and my arm instinctively stretched across the passenger seat in an effort to somehow protect my brother. Upon impact, the back of the work truck flew open and tools fell onto my car and scattered onto the road. I was terrified and sat frozen as the tears flowed from my eyes. My brother was screaming from his front passenger's seat while my youngest brother began to cry from behind me in the back seat. I could not believe what had happened!

The driver got out of his truck and came over to check on us. He walked to my driver's side door and leaning in, immediately said "sorry sweetie, I didn't see you back here...I was trying to find the right house". He then proceeded to say, "my dang mirrors are too small and this same thing just happened to me a month ago". He was clearly a distracted driver regardless of his reasons. His distracted driving cost me a great deal emotionally, financially, and logistically. In those moments I was powerless to prevent his distracted driving. However, that day has completely altered my own driving habits.

I have tried to learn and grow from this incredibly scary experience in order to prevent myself from driving distracted. Before getting behind the wheel, I make sure any unanswered texts or phone calls are returned. I place my phone on vibrate and lay it inside my glove box so I will not be bothered by it. I turn my radio on and choose the station I want to listen to. Then, I make sure to always fasten my seatbelt before shifting into drive. Besides helping myself, I try to do all that I can to help prevent my family and friends from distracted driving. I remind them to put their phones on vibrate and out of sight before we leave. I attempt to be a great co-pilot by helping in any way I can throughout the journey. This includes assisting with directions or changing radio stations for them. I believe in sharing kind, but firm reminders to pay attention to the road ahead of them. It is not always easy to advocate for safe driving habits, especially among my friends, but I know it is extremely necessary. Unfortunately, two of my peers were involved in a horrible auto accident our sophomore year of high school. One friend survived but the other friend did not. All of our lives were forever changed by the devastation of this distracted driving accident.

While my efforts to protect myself, family, and friends account for just a handful of drivers avoiding distractions, I believe greater action is beyond needed. I had the privilege of hearing Maria's Message at my Ohio high school last spring through the generosity of The Maria Tiberi Foundation. Maria's father, Dom Tiberi, shared his family's heartbreaking experience of losing their beloved daughter through a distracted driving accident. They are not sure what distracted Maria, but they are certain something did. Maria tragically lost her life in the accident. Maria's Message struck close to home for all of us students, especially because we just lost our friend the year before. This foundation seems very well established in Ohio with a clear mission. Upon graduation, I hope to become involved in their outreach to further promote the very real, life changing, and heartbreaking dangers of distracted driving.

Mindfulness can be defined as, "the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something". Practicing mindfulness is a powerful tool to enhance focus on the present moment. I believe learning to utilize this tool when driving could significantly decrease the number of distracted drivers. This life skill could easily be taught and modeled in Drivers Education with little extra financial costs and not much more additional time. Imagine the difference it would make on our roads if we all were more mindful drivers.

"Each one of us can make a difference. Together we make change."

- Barbara Mikulski