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Marks & Harrison 2026 Driver Safety Scholarship Application Essay

My mother has told me this story so many times that I sometimes forget I wasn't there.

It was Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, 1999. She was walking to the store with her friend. She was also six months pregnant with my sister. The sidewalk is the kind you'd find in most of the city, cracked, narrow, and only barely separated from the road by a curb that may as well not exist.

Her friend stops mid-sentence and says, almost as an afterthought, that they should switch sides. My mom is closer to the road. It would be more comfortable, the friend says, if she walked on the inside.

So they switch.

A minute later, a car drifts. The driver isn't watching. The friend is hit. She is hospitalized for weeks, and the driver, eventually, goes to jail.

My sister and I are alive because of a three-second conversation no one was supposed to remember.

I think about it more often than I think I should. Not really in much of a heavy way, just more like how you catch your reflection in a window and remember that it's yourself. A friend who walked on the road side didn't know she was saving two future lives. She just thought my mom would be more comfortable. My entire existence, and my sister's, was on the other side of that. One small kindness, one bored driver, one curb, it's still hard for me to fully grasp.

What really bothers me is how normal what they were doing was. It was just two people walking to a store and a driver who, I'm positive, thought of himself as a perfectly safe driver right up until the moment he hit someone. And that's the part nobody really wants to sit with for too long, because if he was just a normal person having a normal bad few seconds, then everyone is also that.

When I got my license, I noticed something I really wasn't expecting. I had spent years thinking I'd never check my phone behind the wheel. My mom had told me that Ethiopia story enough times that I figured the lesson had stuck somewhere deep. And then I sat at a red light during my second or third week of driving and unlocked my phone to skip a song. I didn't think about it. I didn't decide to. My hand just did the thing my hand had been doing since I was twelve.

That scared me more than any statistic ever had. The CDC says distracted driving kills around nine people a day in the US, and I'd seen that number plenty of times, but it didn't really land until I caught my own hand doing something my brain supposedly had a strong opinion about. I wasn't fighting a decision in that moment. I was fighting a habit older than my driver's license.

I think this is what most distracted driving campaigns get wrong. They often keep telling teenagers distracted driving is dangerous, and teenagers keep already knowing that. Knowing the facts isn't really where the gap is. The gap is that your hands have been reaching for your phone every time something dings for ten years of your life, and that doesn't quietly turn off the second you sit down in a different chair. So the conversation can't just be about information, because the information already got there. The hand is the part that didn't get the memo.

A few things I think would actually move the needle, even though none of them are the clean magic answer anyone wants.

The first is just to let real people talk in driver's ed. Not reenactments, not the wrecked car wheeled onto the basketball court at a school assembly. Those feel staged even when they aren't, and once something feels staged your brain quietly shelves it. I've sat in rooms where someone told a real story about losing someone, and years later I still remember those rooms. If I were designing the curriculum, I'd find a few people from the local community who have actually been on either side of one of these crashes and let them speak for ten minutes. Honestly that's the only reason I've been thinking about distracted driving for as long as I have. A friend on a sidewalk in Ethiopia is not an abstract anecdote to me.

The second is technology, and this is the one I think about a lot as someone who's been writing code since middle school. Phones already have a driving mode. Both iOS and Android ship with a version of it. It just isn't on by default, which, if you've ever met a teenager, basically means it isn't on. I can't come up with a good reason for the lockout not to activate the moment your phone notices you're moving above 15 miles per hour. The code is already there. It's a settings decision, made by people who probably worry about edge cases like passengers wanting to use their phones, which is a real concern but nowhere near as serious as the problem we currently have. If insurance companies offered a visible cut in your premium for leaving the lockout on, adoption would happen almost overnight. People will rearrange their habits for a hundred bucks in a way they won't rearrange them for a PSA.

The third one is the one I think may really be unique, because it doesn't require anyone in power to do anything. We need to make it normal for passengers to interrupt distracted driving. Right now, if I'm in a car with a friend and they pick up their phone, the polite thing to do is say nothing. Which is, when you actually write it out, kind of insane. I want a culture where the passenger is the second set of eyes, where it's the most casual thing in the world to lean over and say "hey, what do you need, I'll do it." Not as a lecture. Just as a hand. The friend on that sidewalk understood something most of us never quite do, that a small, almost-rude suggestion can save a life nobody in that moment realizes is in danger.

I don't actually know that friend's name. I should. I keep meaning to ask my mom, and then somehow not doing it. I do know she spent a long time in the hospital and that she's lived a full life since. I know she doesn't think of herself as the reason I'm here, because she has no reason to. As far as she's concerned, she made a passing comment about sidewalk sides. That was it. That was the whole story to her.

But that might actually be the whole point. Distracted driving isn't going to be solved by people becoming some new and improved version of themselves who never drift or glance or reach. It's going to be solved by small acts of attention becoming the default. A passenger speaking up. A phone that locks itself. A driver's ed class with someone real in the room instead of a rented video. None of those feel dramatic enough to be the answer to a problem that kills nine people a day. But the friend who switched sides on a sidewalk in Ethiopia wasn't dramatic either. She just noticed something small, and said something small, and walked into a moment of my mother's life she had no idea she was about to save.

The driver who hit her was probably not a bad person. He was probably just a guy who, like the rest of us, had been getting away with not looking up for years and figured he'd keep getting away with it.

He didn't. And on the other side of that, two children he would never meet would spend the rest of their lives quietly aware they got lucky.

I don't think anyone's existence should come down to luck. Three seconds saved my mom's life. I think we can build a world where three seconds isn't the difference.