

Scholarship Prompt: “How can we educate our community about the dangers of distracted driving, and what are some practical ways we can drastically reduce distracted driving-related accidents?”

Anchored in Awareness: A Mission to End Distracted Driving

As a first-generation Hispanic student and former foster youth, I’ve faced life-altering obstacles that many of my peers have never even imagined. While others worried about fitting in, studying for tests, or winning lacrosse games, I was fighting to survive in a home riddled with addiction, abuse, and instability. My journey has shaped who I am—resilient, determined, and deeply committed to protecting others. This commitment is why the issue of distracted driving hits so close to home. I know what it's like to have life turn on a dime, to be blindsided by loss, and to carry the weight of trauma. The devastation caused by distracted driving is preventable, and I believe education rooted in empathy, action, and community can make all the difference.

Distracted driving is more than just a buzzword—it’s a national crisis. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, over 3,500 lives are lost annually due to distracted driving. That’s nearly ten lives every single day. Behind each statistic is a person with a story, a family shattered by a moment of inattention. Whether it's checking a text, eating, changing a song, or even talking to passengers, the distractions are endless. But so are the opportunities to educate, intervene, and protect lives—especially in communities where one more loss can mean the collapse of an already fragile foundation.

In many ways, I understand the cost of inattention. My mother’s struggle with drug addiction began when I was young, and instead of growing up in a nurturing environment, I endured years of emotional abuse, instability, and neglect. During my freshman year of high school, my mother, still in the depths of addiction, was granted custody. I lived in fear, threatened regularly and left to care for my infant brother while she disappeared for days. My coaches and teachers were the first to recognize the signs. They realized I wasn’t just carrying textbooks—I was carrying trauma. Sophomore year became a turning point when I took the brave step to petition as a homeless student due to neglect and was eventually placed under my aunt’s temporary care. I endured two-hour daily commutes just to stay in school, holding onto the few things that made me feel whole—lacrosse, theater, and volunteering.

It was during this time that I was introduced to the Peer Helping program at my school, where I worked with students with disabilities and found my calling: speech pathology. I knew what it was like to be voiceless, unseen, and misunderstood. I didn’t want anyone else—especially children—to feel that way again. Helping others find their voice gave me a sense of purpose. That sense of purpose can also be applied to educating others about the dangers of distracted driving.

To make real change, we should approach distracted driving education with creativity, community, and compassion. Here are several ways I believe we can educate the public and drastically reduce distracted driving-related accidents:

1. Real Stories for Real Impact

There is unmatched power in personal testimony. Just as I have shared my story to bring awareness to the realities of foster care, homelessness, and addiction, students and families impacted by distracted driving can share theirs. Schools, churches, and youth organizations should invite these individuals to speak, allowing students to see the human cost of a careless moment behind the wheel. Hearing from someone your age who lost a sibling or survived a crash leaves a lasting impression—more than any lecture or statistic ever could.

2. Youth-Led Awareness Campaigns

Teenagers live on their phones, and that's exactly where we need to reach them. A campaign like “#EyesOnTheRoad” could encourage students to create and share short videos or images pledging not to text and drive. These messages could include personal motivations: “I stay focused because my sister is in the backseat,” or “I drive safe so I can make it to graduation.” Peer-driven content resonates with teens in a way that adult messaging often doesn't. When students lead, students listen.

3. Simulations and Hands-On Experiences

Just like I found healing and purpose through hands-on service with my church, students can experience the reality of distracted driving through interactive events. Schools and community centers could host simulations—mock crash scenes or virtual reality programs that show the dangers of texting while driving. These experiences bring the message to life. When students can feel the weight of a crash or see the aftermath, they understand that distracted driving isn't just risky—it's deadly.

4. Partnering with Faith and Community Organizations

Church was where I found hope when I needed it most. It was in youth group that I discovered love, purpose, and the power of service. Faith-based organizations are often underutilized in public safety initiatives, but they hold incredible influence. Churches can host events, offer driving safety pledges, and support families impacted by distracted driving. Through faith, we can promote responsibility, compassion, and community-driven change.

5. Peer Helper Integration

As a Peer Helper, I learned how impactful it can be when students support other students. Incorporating distracted driving education into peer programs ensures the message spreads in a relatable and supportive environment. Role-playing safe driving scenarios, discussing strategies to avoid distractions, and holding each other accountable can create a culture of safety from within.

The key to reducing distracted driving isn't fear—it's empathy. It's showing young people that behind every text, every song skipped, every moment of distraction, there's the potential to change a life forever. It's not about shaming—it's about empowering.

Today, I live with my grandparents. My mother has moved to Central America, and for the first time in years, I feel safe. I can breathe. I can dream. I look toward college not with fear, but with hope. I am determined to defy the statistics that say former foster youth don't make it to higher education. I want to honor the teachers, coaches, and community members who believed in me

by becoming the kind of person I once needed: an advocate, a voice, and a safe place. That's what speech pathology is to me—it's not just a career; it's a calling.

Receiving this scholarship would not only ease the financial burden of college but also support my dream of helping others find their voice. And right now, one of the most important voices I can use is the one that speaks up for safety. For focus. For lives saved through awareness. Let's work together to make our roads—and our communities—safer.