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Distracted Driving Scholarship Essay

In April 2024 I got a heartbreaking call informing me that while my mom was crossing the street on an evening walk before sunset, she was traumatically hit by a car. She was in a well-marked crosswalk, when an SUV with a distracted driver travelling over 30 miles an hour hit her, resulting in debilitating injuries to her legs, numerous stitches on her skull, and a severe concussion. A witness on scene found my mom's cell phone and called me. When I arrived at the intersection, I was in shock at the scale of emergency response and the crowd that had gathered. At the center of the commotion, my mom was lying in a pool of blood on the pavement, with her leg grotesquely twisted under her. The driver stopped and admitted to witnesses that she stopped because she felt a thump and didn't know what happened until she got out of her car, saw my mom lying badly injured on the pavement, and realized, "it was a person!" The driver, distracted, had not noticed the pedestrian until it was too late. My mom was in the hospital for three days, and recovered at home for months. During this time, my whole family pitched in to help her move, practice walking, wash her hair and re-learn many basic activities. Our work, school and other activities had to be adjusted for months to assist her. While we were happy to help her, it took a significant emotional, financial and physical toll on everyone in our family.

The police report clearly identified that the driver was fully at fault in the incident, however no citation was issued to the driver. It seemed the police felt sorry for the distraught driver who had hit my mom. I believe this was a mistake. While I do not doubt the driver regretted

not paying closer attention, everyone must experience the consequences of their actions in order not to repeat mistakes such as this. Word of mouth and anecdotes exchanged between friends and acquaintances are often the most powerful ways to change people's minds and beliefs. The story this driver will tell is that an unfortunate accident occurred, and she literally drove away from the whole situation unscathed and unaffected. A police citation would have clearly communicated that our community values the safety of pedestrians and that we have zero tolerance for distracted driving, which the driver would have relayed to her friends and acquaintances. This kind of story sinks in and causes people to think carefully about how to avoid such a situation in their own lives.

After nearly a year of recuperation, healing and therapy, my mom had returned almost fully to her normal lifestyle. Her scars are still visible, reminding all of us of that traumatic experience that forever changed our lives. My mom usually tries to cover the scars on her face with makeup, or a strategic hairstyle. But when she does not, they are a powerful reminder of what can occur when a driver is distracted only for a moment.

Over a year later, my mom is doing much better, back to work and her normal lifestyle. However insurance companies and attorneys are still negotiating and settling the final bills and claims. The driver who caused the accident is by now far removed from the accident, returned to her normal life, with no impact and likely continuing with her distracted driving habits.

I believe at the time of a distracted driving incident such as the one my family experienced last year, the driver who caused the accident must immediately feel the consequences of their actions. If found at fault, a police citation must be immediately issued with a sizable fine. Furthermore, the driver should immediately bear a significant responsibility to help the injured parties recover. It is critical that the consequences occur quickly after the incident so that the driver directly feels the impacts of their actions. The driver could be required to set up an escrow account for the injured party to withdraw from to pay for medical bills, transportation to doctor's appointments, and purchase meals for the family affected.

I also believe that those who have been directly or indirectly affected by distracted driving must be given a platform to share their stories. We all hear stories from friends, or on the news, of personal tragedies, and they affect us deeply. These stories, especially when experienced by someone we know personally or professionally, have a much greater impact on future actions of those who hear them, than articles, statistics or reports that generalize trends and behaviors. We can imagine ourselves in their shoes, empathize with their pain, their regret, and their healing journey. When we hear these stories firsthand, we often vow to change our own ways, we make a new resolve not to perpetuate dangerous or irresponsible behaviors.

In my own life, the incident from April 2024 has forever changed the way I drive each day. I know in the depth of my soul how quickly a family's life can be turned upside down with just a fleeting moment of distraction. Because I have experienced this first hand, I know that the text, the call, the email can wait and it is not worth the risk. I feel so strongly about this

that I take every opportunity to share my family's story with my friends, teachers and colleagues. I show them the photos, I share how much pain it caused, I tell them about the financial cost, and the long healing process that followed. I share my story because I am hopeful that it may affect them in the same way it has affected me, and influence them to stay focused, alert and undistracted.

While I appreciate the role that insurance companies play in settling the details of expensive incidents, this arrangement inappropriately disconnects the party at fault from the consequences of their actions. We need to find ways to reasonably allow distracted drivers to immediately feel the impact, to see firsthand the pain their actions have caused, because that will be the most effective way to ensure they do not happen again.