

Fitch Law Firm – Truck Accident Awareness Scholarship. By Grace Schuler; 30 Walker Avenue, Gaithersburg, MD 20877, USA; Phone – 301-518-4755; Email – graceschuler@rcn.com. Attends Drexel University in Philadelphia.

April 11, 2017. I started the day off great with a college visit and ended it seeing my older brother, Van, on the operating table, about to undergo neurosurgery for a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Just that morning he had gotten word that, in addition to receiving an academic scholarship at his chosen college, he would also be getting a partial athletic scholarship to play baseball for them. It was great news, but sadly short lived. While he was riding his bicycle home later that evening after a baseball workout, Van was hit by a car a block from home and rushed by ambulance to the area's closest shock trauma unit.

My parents got the call from the EMTs and we raced to the area's shock trauma hospital. Upon arrival, we were ushered into the operating prep room and told to say our goodbyes as his chances of surviving were about 50%. He was just 18. The priest gave him last rites, and surgery began.

Van survived, but recovery was not easy. He was in a coma for 24 hours, and in the ICU for nearly two weeks. He lost 45 pounds, but was making progress the entire time. After a few painful days, he could walk and somewhat talk, so was sent via ambulance to an acute rehab facility directly from the ICU. There, he had intense physical, occupational, and speech therapy and, again, made great progress. The doctors and staff were amazed and chalked it up to youth, being an athlete and a desire to come back 110%.

After some time, Van was sent home with my family -- wearing a helmet because part of his skull was stored in a bone bank freezer while his brain was still swelling and decompressing. He underwent three more surgeries and ended up with a titanium prosthetic skull piece in his head.

I share this story with you because, although the vehicle that hit my brother was not a truck, my research has shown me that many of the top reasons for accidents, whether the driver is operating a car or a truck, are the same. These include: drug and alcohol use, distraction due to texting and talking, fatigue, and speeding. There are additional reasons for truck accidents, such as equipment failure, improper loading of cargo, or poor maintenance of the vehicle, however, for this conversation, I am going to stick to discussing solutions aimed at distracted driving and drug and alcohol abuse.

Much has been done to reinforce the dangers of texting while driving already in Ohio and elsewhere. For example, since 2009, my home state of Maryland has banned all drivers from writing or sending text messages while operating a motor vehicle. This is one of the first lessons taught by any driving school in the area.

Currently in Maryland, the distracted driving fine for first-time offenders is \$83. A second offense can cost \$140, and a third offense is \$160. There are also additional costs related to court proceedings, as well as points on your driving record. And should you injure or kill someone while you are using a handheld device, thanks to Jake's Law (named after five-year-old Jake Owen who was killed by a driver who was texting and talking), you will be fined up to \$5,000 and receive three years in jail. A few years ago, Maryland lawmakers approved a bill that increases the maximum fine for texting while driving to \$500.

According to the Maryland Department of Transportation, on average, more than 53,000 distracted driving crashes have occurred each year from 2017 to 2021 and distracted driving contributes to 48 percent of all crashes in Maryland. Over the last five years in my Maryland county alone (Montgomery), five teenagers have been killed and at least 292 teen pedestrians have been hit because drivers were texting or being otherwise distracted. A few years ago, as part of educating all drivers, the county instituted the "Stay Alert. Stay Alive" campaign (see following page) directed at both distracted drivers and pedestrians and bicyclists to try to combat the problem.

In addition to requiring everyone to take professional driver's ed classes before applying for their license so they can really learn the rules of the road and how to react in an emergency, I believe a great solution for reducing risk would be an invention to help lower the temptation to drive while distracted or under the influence.

While this concept may not be doable quickly for all vehicles, I can envision it being put into effect more quickly for truck drivers due to there being fewer numbers.

According to stats I researched through the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, fatal truck accidents average 4,500 a year. I believe many of them could be avoided by the simple idea of installing a device in every truck similar to the ignition interlock breathalyzer. The device would prevent the truck from starting until the driver listened to/viewed the public service announcement that follows:

**AUDIO WHEN KEY IS INSERTED IN IGNITION:
DO NOT THINK OF DRIVING THIS TRUCK IF YOU:**

- Have consumed drugs or alcohol;
- Are tired;
- Plan to text or talk without a hands-free device;
- Are going to eat, drink or play with your radio.

IF YOU CAN'T BE RESPONSIBLE, DON'T DRIVE!

VIDEO:

As the check list is being read, a series of *Street Smart* ads similar to the following would be rotating on the screen:



While I am not sure that a specific invention or device can make someone take more personal responsibility, I do believe being acutely aware of the causes of distracted driving and paying the price for not following the rules are keys to stopping the problem.

Repetition is key to learning and is necessary for any major change. If you think about the past campaigns that got people to buckle their seat belts or to wear bicycle helmets, it was the repetition of the messaging that caused the behavior change. I think the campaign I propose could make a true impact.

I'd like to share that after six years, my brother, Van, has nearly fully recovered from his brain injury and will graduate from Drexel University next month. When he was finally able to start college, it was clear that he would no longer be able to play college-level baseball or study architecture – the risk to his physical health and loss of some mathematical-related skills was just too great. However, he transferred to my college and we were roommates while he attended college and continued to recover. He majored in medical product design and his goal is to develop tools and products that help others recover who have been injured due to motor vehicle accidents.

I'd also like to mention that I am applying for your scholarship because my family has been facing crushing debt since the accident. Van went through years of extensive physical, speech and occupational rehab, much of which was not covered by insurance, but paid for out of pocket by my parents. The upside is that Van's recovery has been so miraculous due to this additional treatment that his neurosurgeons from Johns Hopkins have invited him to speak at Harvard Medical School and other neurology conferences. The downside is that the additional treatment cost the majority of the equity in our home and all my parents had saved through the years for our college educations and their retirement.

I spent much of my high school and college years writing scholarship essays in order to fund my education. Although I have been working in hospitality jobs since I was 14, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, it will be scholarships such as this one that will allow me to complete my education without a huge burden of debt at the end.

Thank you for considering me – it is appreciated.



My brother, Van, and me in front of the statue of Drexel's mascot, Mario.