

Share a personal story on how distracted driving has impacted your life

Colton was my older brother and my best friend. I often refer to him as my best friend because that is what he has always been to me. The eight-year gap between us never hindered our friendship. Colton was accountable for my younger brother and me in many ways and we took up a lot of his time and energy, but he never failed to show us patience and love at every opportunity.

On December 3rd, 2019, Colton was involved in a fatal car accident on his way home from work when someone ran a stop sign. When I learned what had happened, everything began to move in slow motion. My mother's frantic words and panicked description of what had happened slowly dissolved into white noise. I became numb. For the rest of the semester, I was excused from classes. My friends would check in on me and visit me at home. Nothing felt familiar; things that were supposed to feel "normal" at the time were all out of place. I was just about to turn sixteen and I was applying for my first driver's license. I felt anxious every time I got behind the wheel and experience fear and dread wash over me.

After some time, I gathered myself up into one piece and began attending my classes again. I hoped that being in school would help me regain some feeling of normalcy. One morning, I was called in to the school counselor's office for what I thought was going to be another "check-in". Instead, my counselor invited me to join a new organization that the school was integrating, called "Sources of Strength". Putting aside my pessimism, I considered that it might help me. I attended meetings and talked in large groups where students expressed their feelings. I was surprised and honored to learn that I had been nominated by my teachers to become a peer leader within the organization. After attending the required training camp, I took

on a leadership role and worked to expand the organization. I began to feel unknotted inside. I was finally able to breathe through the pain.

Joining Sources of Strength has been the most unique and influential opportunity I have experienced yet and I learned that processing grief is exactly that: a process. It helped me through my darkest time. After Colton's death, I could not imagine anything good coming from such a terrible accident. Yes, it was senseless and tragic; but it also inspired me to make the world a better place. I believe my personal experience with trauma allows me to connect with others who are going through difficult experiences. I am currently enrolled in an EMT training program and will be EMT certified and working next year. I hope to bring the same light into other's lives as Sources of Strength brought into mine. In this way, I hope to assign Colton's death a greater meaning and allow him to live on through me.