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‘I Was Lucky,’ Says Teenager Who Didn’t Buckle Up

Kansas law enforcement plan extra seatbelt enforcement beginning May 21

For Megan Reed, the trip to school that icy February morning started out quiet enough. Her friend was driving, and she was riding along.

But how it ended was quite a different matter as the 17-year-old ended up in a motorized wheelchair, a victim of a broken leg because she didn’t wear her seatbelt.

Reed told her story at a news conference announcing stepped-up seatbelt enforcement across Kansas that begins May 21 and continues through the Memorial Day weekend.

The annual “Click it. Or ticket.” initiative means officers will be working overtime specifically to make sure people are buckled up, said Capt. Rusty Leeds, commander of the Wichita Police Department’s Patrol West Bureau.

“It costs nothing to wear a seatbelt,” Leeds told reporters on Thursday, May 10, at the Wichita Police Department. “But it has the potential to save your life or prevent serious, debilitating injuries.”

Kansas is one of 32 states, plus the District of Columbia, whose laws allow a vehicle to be stopped solely because occupants are not properly restrained. Leeds added that Kansas police and sheriff’s departments and the Highway Patrol will be enforcing seatbelt laws at night, since Kansas exceeds national statistics for deaths of unrestrained occupants.

For 2010, the latest available, 61 percent of the 10,647 passenger vehicle occupants who died in motor vehicle traffic crashes nationwide during primarily

nighttime hours were not wearing seatbelts at the time of the fatal crash. In primarily daylight hours, the rate is 42 percent.

In Kansas, by comparison, 76 percent of the 154 passenger vehicle occupants who died in traffic crashes between 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. were not wearing their seatbelts at the time of the fatal crash, compared with 57 percent during the daytime hours.

Additional seatbelt and other traffic enforcement also reduces crime. Leeds said a traffic stop in Wichita resulted in the arrest of an individual who later was charged with a federal felony violation. Other instances of criminal arrests have occurred elsewhere in the state, officials say.

“Public safety encompasses traffic safety,” Leeds said. “Criminals use vehicles like everybody else. You really can’t differentiate the two from each other. It’s all public safety.”

Reed, for sure, will be buckled up. She told reporters her experience earlier this year means she’ll never ride without a seatbelt again.

Reed said she had simply forgotten to buckle up that morning last winter when her friend lost control on an icy road and slid down an embankment.

“I remember thinking that this was it, and that my life would end within the branches of the trees ahead,” she said in describing her crash. As it happened, “the biggest bone in my body was snapped in half.”

“It takes one time of forgetting – or even choosing – not to wear your seatbelt to change your life, or even end it,” she said. “I was lucky.”

Reed said everyday tasks were a challenge for a time, and she performed in Pittsburg High School’s spring musical in a motorized wheelchair. Today, she walks unaided. Asked about her recovery, Reed said she was never in a cast because her fracture was repaired with an iron rod.

“When it gets cold, it hurts,” she said. “And it will be like that for the rest of my life.”

Further information about Kansas seat belt enforcement can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/DriveSafeKansas> or <http://twitter.com/#!/drivesafekansas>.

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