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Seatbelt Enforcement Starts This Week Across Kansas

Departments plan overtime to emphasize Memorial Day travel safety

Jaclyn O'Neill of Lenexa survived a traffic crash earlier this month and learned firsthand a lesson that Kansas law enforcement officers will start teaching this week: Buckle your seatbelt.

"The combination of the air bag and seatbelt protected me perfectly," said O'Neill, a 29-year-old pharmaceutical sales representative. "They did an amazing job. I will always wear my seatbelt for sure now."

Kansas law enforcement officers today commence the annual statewide "Click it. Or ticket." program. Highway Patrol troopers, sheriff's deputies and police officers statewide will be working overtime now through the Memorial Day weekend specifically to make sure people are buckled up.

"It costs nothing to wear a seatbelt," said Capt. Rusty Leeds, commander of the Wichita Police Department's Patrol West Bureau, at a May 10 KDOT news conference. "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 officers will be enforcing seatbelt laws at night, since Kansas exceeds national statistics for deaths of unrestrained riders in darkness.

Nationwide in 2010, the latest year for which data is available, 61 percent of the 10,647 passenger vehicle occupants who died in motor vehicle traffic crashes during primarily nighttime hours were not wearing seat belts 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.

O'Neill, a pharmaceutical sales representative, avoided becoming a fatality statistic when she was properly restrained while driving northbound in Lenexa, Kan., on Quivira Road near 94th Street the afternoon of May 8. A driver pulled out of a parking lot to turn left, and O'Neill's vehicle smacked right into the other car, triggering O'Neill's airbags and tightening her seatbelt.

"It happened very quickly," O'Neill recalled. "The entire car shook. All the air bags came out. My cell phone flew out of my cupholder, and even out of its case. It was a big hit, and the car shook a lot."

O'Neill was transported to an emergency room, but she had no fractures and only minor bruises and scrapes, she said.

"The airbag and the seatbelt did a good job," she said. "They protected me perfectly."

She added that her father, John O'Neill of Lenexa, typically didn't wear a seatbelt because of discomfort. "But after seeing photos of my car after my crash, he told me he will be wearing a seatbelt from now on." O'Neill said.

Note to editors and reporters: To arrange an interview with Jaclyn O'Neill about seatbelt safety, contact Chris Bortz or Neal Thurman. 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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