



Art by Alivia Benedict

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

Dangerous driving decisions impact teenagers, adults alike

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Reaching for her phone on her way to a teacher conference at Greenbush on July 30, Diana Oertle, former cheer coach and Meadowlark reading and math teacher, texts another teacher at the conference three words: “yes, almost there.”

Two minutes later, she is trying to call that same friend to inform her she just got in a car accident.

She does not answer.

As Oertle tries to remove herself from the car, she realizes she is unable to move.

While she was texting, Oertle began to cross the center line as another vehicle was coming in her direction. In order to not hit the oncoming car, Oertle over-corrected and ran her car off the road.

In doing so, she hit an embankment and found herself and her car in a field.

For her daughter, senior Hannah Oertle, the news of her mother texting and driving was a complete shock.

“It really surprised me because she is the biggest stickler about not using your phone at all while you are driving. She is even kind of iffy about calling while you are driving,” Hannah said. “She has never really texted and drove before so she was not used to it.”

According to Resource Office Dave Petrey, texting, Snapchatting, or other forms of distracted driving have become a common trend among drivers.

“[Distracted driving] can be illegal tasks such as texting or it can just be normal everyday things,” Petrey said. “Someone who has been driving for their whole lives has at least once been distracted while driving. Probably more than that.”

Diana claims she is not one to normally text and drive, but her actions this one time resulted in multiple consequences.

Diana broke a vertebrae in her back, which caused her temporary paralysis at the scene of the accident. She was then transferred to KU Medical Hospital where she received eight screws and two rods in her back to help heal the broken vertebrae. This delayed her ability to go back to work and left her with several months of physical therapy. The doctors expect the entire recovery to take a year.

“It was such a senseless thing that didn’t need to happen and would not have if I would have just left my phone alone,” Diana said. “Every day I can feel the rods and screws in my back and it is a constant reminder of a stupid decision.”

Diana has found her injury put pressure on her husband and two children as well as herself.

“I’m sure I perceived my family’s hardships to be more than they would say they were. They made many trips back and forth to Kansas City while I was in the hospital,” Diana said. “They had to help take care of me when I got home and until I could do things on my own again.”

Hannah believes her mother has been hard on herself since the accident.

“She got onto herself about [texting and driving], especially the first couple of months,” Hannah said. “We have all told her it was an accident. It could have happened regardless, and not necessarily because of her phone, it could have happened a different way. But, it did happen and all that we care about is that she is better now.”

Petrey believes he has seen an increase in the preoccupation of adults and students while driving, specifically when they are exiting the school at the end of the day.

“Most of the adults that I have problems with are on their cellphones,” Petrey said. “I am trying to get them to stop [at the end of the parking lot] and they are not paying attention, or they stop when I am trying to get them to go.”

Petrey arranges opportunities throughout the school year to promote safe driving to teens. Petrey is the sponsor of the Seat Belts Are For Everyone (SAFE) program that surveys how many students

and adults wear their seat belts as they pull into the school drop-off and parking lot.

This year, approximately 95.8 percent of drivers wore their seat belts to school.

While this number is not where Petrey wants the seat belt percentage to be, he recognizes it is better than the 78 percent of drivers that wore their seat belts to the high school in 2013. Through SAFE, students are also allowed to sign pledge cards that state they will wear their seat belts and in return, their name will be put into a drawing for a \$25 Visa gift card. Petrey also organizes the seat belt simulator with the Highway Patrol in order to convince students of the benefits of wearing seat belts.

While distracted driving occurs in all age groups, according to a 2013 survey by the US Department of Transportation, 10 percent of teenage driving fatalities were said to be a result of some type of distraction while driving.

This is the highest percentage out of all age groups. Senior Tanner McCauley believes many drivers do not realize the hazards that accompany distracted driving.

“We all do it, I have done it multiple

times,” McCauley said. “It is something that needs to be taken more seriously. I kind of under-dramatized it in the beginning. I thought, ‘oh I can handle it, I’m a skilled driver, it is just a phone,’ but in reality, it can ruin some things and put people’s lives in danger.”

McCauley also experienced consequences for his distracted driving.

On March 6, McCauley was leaving his house to attend a rehearsal before school that morning. As he started to back out of his driveway onto East 126th street, McCauley grabbed his phone to look at

the time to ensure he was not late. In doing so, he forgot to check behind him to make sure no other cars were on the road. So when he pulled out, he did not think the gold Ford Fusion in the ditch was because of him.

“I thought they were just there, I did not think it was my fault at first, I just thought it was odd,” McCauley said. “I asked them if they were okay and they shook their heads yes. I drove away, I got into my first hour. Then the phone rang and I had to go to the office.”

When McCauley reached the office, he found a police officer waiting for him.

“I was almost detained because I left a scene of an incident and I had been on my phone. I almost got a misdemeanor and I would have had to fight it off in court,” McCauley said.

Because the two people in the car were not injured, McCauley had to pay \$85 for their towing bill and all other charges were dropped.

“I was really embarrassed for myself and I was really ashamed, all because I pulled out my phone to check the time while pulling out,” McCauley said.

Despite his experiences with his phone during driving, McCauley still finds it difficult to stop.

“I do not think of the dangers [when looking at my phone]. I have obviously been reminded a couple of times of the dangers, so I try to be a little more careful,” McCauley said. “But let’s face it, our phones are part of our lives so when my phone goes off, I instantly reach for it. It is sad but I do it. I try to manage myself as I am driving but it is hard.”

Both Oertle and McCauley are thankful they did not harm anyone because of their decision to look at their phone.

“It all happens in a split second,” Diana said. “From the time that I sent the text message to when I tried to call my friend was two minutes of time on my phone. It was so quick that I was across the center line thinking ‘oh my gosh, I’m going to kill someone because of a stupid decision.’ I was fortunate that I was the only one injured or involved in the accident. If I would have injured or killed someone else I do not think that would be very easy to recover from.”

BY THE NUMBERS

DISTRACTED DRIVING

Info collected from distraction.gov & enddd.org

In the first half of 2015

16,255

people died in motor vehicle traffic crashes

Texting creates a crash risk

23 times greater than not texting and driving

Seat belts reduce crash related injuries by

50%

73%

of drivers 18-20 years old admit to texting and driving

In 2014

3,179

people were killed &

431,000

were injured in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted driving

5

seconds is the average time your eyes are off the road while texting