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Darcy Keith knows well the importance of buckling up. The Fishers woman helped lead the fight for the state's new seatbelt law that will require all occupants, including those in the back seat of a vehicle, to wear seatbelts.

New seatbelt law clicks locally

Tragedy prompts Fishers woman to work to strengthen state laws

By William Fouts

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As of July 1, Indiana's new seatbelt law will require passengers in all seating positions to be belted. While some may grumble the new law is

just more government intrusion on personal choice, one Fishers woman says it's a small price to pay compared to what can be lost.

The new law requires all occupants of a motor vehicle to be belted including people driving and riding in pickup trucks and SUVs with truck plates - which were previously exempt from wearing seatbelts. However, police can no longer set up seatbelt compli-

ance checkpoints.

The new law also makes the state eligible for \$16 million in annual federal funding. Critics have charged that tying the federal funding to the bill is a way of forcing states to pass laws the federal government is powerless to mandate.

However, Darcy Keith asks Hoosiers to consider the alternative. She survived a crash that killed two of her friends. The then-22-year-old Ball

State senior and four of her sorority sisters were returning to Muncie Sept. 12, 1991, from a sorority function at Morehead College in Kentucky.

The wind gust of two passing semis caused the driver of the car Keith was riding in to jerk the wheel to avoid being sucked under the trailer of one of the trucks. The driver lost control of the car and spun.

SEE SEATBELT, PAGE A9

SEATBELT

From Page A1

"A third semi saw us but couldn't stop in time - hit our car, climbing up on top of it, crushing my sorority sister directly behind the (front seat) passenger," Keith said. "The one in the middle of the back seat - flipped her upside down and broke her neck."

None of the women had been drinking. The two women in the front seat were belted and walked away from the crash. Keith and her back seat companions were not.

Seated behind the driver, the impact drove her head into the side window and then into the front seat. She was in a coma six days and then barely conscious for eight more days. She was temporarily paralyzed on her right side. She had to relearn how to eat, drink, walk and even breathe.

With only months to go before she was scheduled to graduate with a degree in actuarial science and a job waiting for her, her future was suddenly in question.

"Probably one of the worst things for me was I had memory loss," Keith said. "I was a senior in college. I had just completed an eight-month co-op internship at an insurance company in Carmel, and I had lost memory of my whole major. ... Everything was gone in one instant, because I chose not to wear a seatbelt."

Now 38, Keith has mostly recovered. She does indeed work as an insurance executive. However, she still suffers from chronic vertigo and many of her memories before the crash are lost.

Keith speaks extensively on the importance of seatbelts. She testified before the General Assembly in favor the new law.

"In this business, you find a lot of people who for one issue or another they're an inspiration

because of what they've had to go through," Sen. Thomas Wyss, R-Fort Wayne, said of Keith.

Wyss and Rep. Peggy Welch, D-Bloomington, spearheaded the bill through the General Assembly. Wyss says critics who argue the bill is more "nanny legislation" or surrendering to pressure from Washington should consider Keith's experience and remember that few are as lucky to survive such an accident.

"I have never done anything in any of this safety area where it wasn't about saving lives," Wyss said. "And, damn it, if that's not my responsibility down here, then nothing is."

In the meantime, Keith will continue to speak out on the need to wear seatbelts. She is a regular speaker at Hamilton County Sheriff Doug Carter's teen forums on avoiding destructive decisions.

"If I can help one person by not making the same decisions I did, then its worth it," she said.