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Learn from my mistake, buckle up

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Darcy (Wilkinson) Keith, formerly of Rushville, doesn't want anyone else to have to experience what she went through. That's why she is elated at the passage of House Enrolled Act 1257, the new seat belt law which goes into effect July 1.

"Was I excited when the state legislature and governor signed into law HEA 1257 - motor vehicle restraint systems," she exclaimed. "This new law, effective July 1, 2007, requires all occupants of motor vehicles to wear safety belts, with certain exceptions including one for farmers who operate a vehicle on a farm in connection with agricultural pursuits that are usual and normal to the farming operation, a person who is an occupant of a motor vehicle participating in a parade, a person

who is an occupant other than the operator of a truck on a construction site, and a few others."

The measure also provides that a law enforcement agency may not use a safety belt checkpoint to detect and issue a citation for failure to wear a safety belt."

"HEA 1257 will save lives, save injuries and increases survival rate in crashes, not to mention saving taxpayers money," Keith said. "Had I worn my seatbelt in the car crash where I was the only back seat survivor, I'm confident that I would not have sustained the injuries that I did, not to mention one of my sorority sisters would be alive today. In addition, Indiana is now eligible to receive a one-time allotment of more than \$15 million of federal highway money."

Being included on the invitation-only list



IT'S THE LAW: Pictured (left to right) are Senator Wyss (R), who authored and sponsored HEA 1237 in the 2004-06 legislative sessions, Darcy Keith, Gov. Mitch Daniels, and Rep. Peggy Welch (D), who authored and sponsored the bill in the 2007 legislative session.

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for this ceremonial bill signing was an honor and a humbling experience.

"I appreciate my employer, State Auto Insurance, allowing me to attend this memorable event. By the way, Rep. Cleo Duncan was co-author of the bill."

Keith (Wilkinson at the time) was in a tragic accident Sept. 12, 1991 while she was a senior at Ball State University. She and four sorority sisters were returning to Ball State after conducting sorority rush parties at Morehead State University in Morehead, Ky. Traveling on I-75, the driver of the car in which Keith was riding lost control because of the wind shear from two passing semi-tractor trailers. Their car was broad-sided by another semi, killing the two other girls in the back seat.

"The driver and passenger, who were buckled in seat belts, blacked out from the force of the impact, but literally walked away unharmed and returned to college," she explained. "None of us in the back seat were buckled; I was the only back seat survivor."

She was Lifelined to the University of Cincinnati Hospital and placed on life support in the surgical critical care unit. In a coma for six days, she then spent another week at U of C Hospital before being transferred to Hook Rehab at Community East Hospital in Indianapolis.

"While the prognosis was that I would remain at in-patient rehab for another three months, God had another plan in mind. I was discharged a short six weeks later on Nov. 7, to return to college the following spring semester," Keith continued. "The nurses at Community East

called me the 'Miracle Child' because of the serious condition of my injuries and the healing that took place in such a short time. They hadn't seen anything like it. The director of Hook Rehab still calls me a miracle to this date. I believe in the power of prayer and contribute it and God's healing grace to my recovery."

Since 1994 she has been involved in speaking for Think-First, an international program on brain and spinal cord injury prevention.

In 2003, Methodist Hospital (Clarian Health) asked her to become part of a newly-formed seatbelt coalition which was formed to show support, including testimony, for the new seatbelt legislation bill. The first legislative session in which the new bill was introduced was 2004.

"I have been active on the coalition ever since, testifying in all four legislative sessions in which the seatbelt bill has been," she said.

The injuries she sustained in the crash were two traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), temporary right side paralysis from the left lobe injury, right collapsed lung, right paralyzed vocal cord, foot drop, brain bleeding, brain swelling, and memory loss.

"I had to relearn how to eat, drink, walk, talk, think, drive, and be re-potty trained. To be 22 years old with memory loss, in a wheelchair and wearing adult diapers was a very humbling experience," she related.

"Due to my left lobe brain injury, I lost memory of my entire college major, actuarial science. It was very frustrating to be a college senior, who just completed an eight month co-op internship at a company with a promise of a job upon graduation, and then lose everything mentally, physically, and emotionally because I made a conscious decision not to wear a

seat belt. My promising future, as I knew it, vanished in one instant," she said.

When she returned to college only four months following the crash, she changed her major to insurance and graduated a year and a half later with a bachelor's degree in 1993.

"I continued going to out-patient rehab during that first semester back in college, though," she noted.

Since 1996, she has worked as a commercial underwriter for State Auto Insurance.

"While I've had a remarkable recovery, there are still things that I am unable to do," Keith commented. "Due to my right-side weakness from the paralysis, I can no longer participate in activities which require much physical emphasis. I also have chronic vertigo, where I experience a very small amount of dizziness constantly. This is controlled by diet, sufficient sleep, and managing stress. Medication is required if all else fails. If the vertigo isn't managed, I am flat on my back from the dizziness."

"Lastly, I have permanent

memory loss. I think my sister, Dana, has 'fun' with this, as she will tell me some stories of things that I used to do when I was younger, and I sometimes can't remember if they are true or not. As I mentioned, I made a conscious decision not to wear a seatbelt. It wasn't a law then, nor did I want anyone telling me what to do. However, I do not wish anyone to go through the physical and emotional pain that I have experienced because of my poor choice. I've seen families torn apart from injuries such as mine.

"In an era of declining personal responsibility, laws are designed to help protect us from ourselves and others. The principle of the speed limit law and blood alcohol limit (DWI) law is no different than being required to buckle up. It just makes sense."

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