

"If News is not really news unless it is bad news, it may be difficult to claim we are an informed nation" -

Norman Cousins

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Seat belt usage may have saved lives of local sisters during accident.

Cindy Nielson remembers the words she told her daughters – Jennifer and Hannah – prior to seeing them drive off Aug. 20.

"I yelled buckle up. I find myself saying that anytime they are going anywhere."

Cindy Nielson

Jennifer, a sophomore at Sidney High School, and Hannah, a freshman, were heading to visit friends Jacqueline, Danielle and Dominique Irigoien that day in the early afternoon. The Irigoiens live in rural Richland County on County Road 331.

Since getting her license in April, Jennifer said she has driven to the Irigoien's home on several occasions.

About a mile from their destination, the Nielsons fishtailed after going down a hill and turning to the right. The 1997 Ford Explorer then went into a ditch and pulled out, but Jennifer overcorrected. She said the vehicle jumped over a ditch "and got air." The vehicle then skidded sideways, hit some dirt clumps, turned around, and rolled once.

"We landed right side up facing the road," Jennifer said.

The girls said both side windows were totally gone and the windshield caved in front of Jennifer's head. Neither girl was seriously injured, but Jennifer was bleeding some on her head. Jennifer says she was driving about 45 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Hannah, who kept her eyes closed throughout the accident, remembers wanting to tell Jennifer to hurry up and get out of the vehicle after it stopped. Hannah, however, looked and saw Jennifer was already climbing out of the driver's window.

"I thought 'Oh, I better get a move on,'" Hannah now laughs.

The girls walked and ran to the Irigoien's house. Once there, Hannah called her mother.

"I knew Jen was bleeding, and Hannah was crying. But I knew they both walked to Irigoiens, so I knew they were OK."

Cindy Nielson

Cindy and the girls' father, Louie, called the police about the accident.

The two girls are very involved in activities, including dancing, volleyball, drill team and softball.

"There are two great young ladies who have tremendous support from their parents. They have been taught to do their best in whatever they attempt. They are very active in a number of different school activities, and are positive forces here at SHS."

Brent Leibach, assistant principal at Sidney High School

Although the vehicle was totaled, the couple was happy their daughters were still healthy.

"We were just hoping they learned something from it," Cindy said.

The girls learned the importance of wearing seat belts because authorities said they might have been killed in the accident if they hadn't buckled up.

"To help raise awareness about the importance of seat belt use, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, through their northeastern Montana Safe Kids/Safe Communities Coalition and in collaboration with law enforcement agencies throughout the state, strive to recognize crash survivors with its 'Saved by the Belt' award.

With school back in full swing and increased levels of traffic, it's a perfect opportunity to remind people about a very simple way to keep themselves and their passengers safe by buckling up every time they ride."

Jacklyn Damm, Richland County's Safe Kids/Safe Communities director

Criteria for the award includes nominees were wearing seat belts at the time of the crash, didn't contribute to the crash due to reckless driving, and had not been drinking.

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