

Second chances - Child safety seats, seat belts help family survive rollover



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It only takes a second for tragedy to strike.

It was midday on July 16, 2012, and Amber Killoy, 29, was driving her family's truck with a 22-foot camp trailer in tow—heading north on Interstate 15. She recalls being about 20 minutes outside of Butte and thinking about getting home and unpacking. In one second she remembers noticing that it was getting windy, and in the next second, she said,

“Everything went black.”

“The last thing I remember is a gust of wind yanking the truck to one side.”

Amber had been traveling with her 1-year-old twin daughters, Emma and Grace. Just a few hours earlier, she and her husband, Brian, 35, had packed up the truck and trailer, after a weeklong family camping trip in the Big Hole Valley. Amber said that the last thing that the couple did was to take the usual, extra few seconds to safely strap the twins into their child safety seats and securely buckle them into the back seat.

“We just did what we are supposed to do,” Brian said.

Amber remembers pulling out of the campground, with Brian, who was driving a second truck hauling his mom's camp trailer, following closely behind. Now, the unthinkable was happening—Amber and the twins were strapped into the cab of a pick-up truck that was rolling wildly out of control across the asphalt.

Though she was initially knocked unconscious, Amber later learned that she and the girls had been involved in a roll-over crash. Eyewitness reports said that the truck and trailer rolled three times before breaking apart—with the truck continuing to roll two more times before coming to a stop.

Amber remembers waking up to the sounds of her terrified daughter's cries, coupled with the voices of concerned motorists who had come to her aid, reassuring her that help was on the way. She immediately began calling cell phone numbers and asking other motorists to call her family to let them know what had happened.

Meanwhile, Brian had pulled off the interstate and was driving along the frontage road. He had managed to get ahead of Amber's and the girls' crash location. He recalls

pulling off the road with trepidation, after seeing a string of cars backed up in the south bound lanes of Interstate 15.

“When I saw all the cars on the road, I just had a weird feeling,” he said.

Within minutes, Brian had heard the news, unhitched the trailer, turned his truck around and was headed for the crash site.

“I remember driving down the highway praying, ‘Please let them be OK,’” he said.

When Brian arrived at the crash scene, Amber was already in the ambulance. The girls, who were still strapped into their child safety seats, were crying, but OK — placed safely on the ground outside of the wreck.

“It was huge sigh of relief to know that they all were alive,” he said.

Amber and the twins were transported to St. James Healthcare in Butte. Medical evaluations revealed that the girls had escaped the crash with barely a scratch.

“It still amazes me that they were OK,” Amber said.

As for Amber, the seatbelt had kept her from being ejected from the cab. But, because the truck door had opened during the roll-over, she suffered numerous broken bones. Her injuries included multiple broken ribs, multiple breaks in her pelvis, a broken left femur, and a shattered left ankle. Amber said that in the past year she has had several orthopedic surgeries, but is walking again and very thankful to be alive.

Mark Knutson, Montana Highway Patrol trooper, responded to the Killoy’s crash scene.

“It was a fairly severe crash and I know that the kids would have been killed or more severely hurt if they were not in their child safety seats,” he said.

Knutson added that he believes that Amber is alive today because she wore her seatbelt. Knutson explained that today’s automobiles are designed to absorb the impact of a crash and protect the vehicle’s occupants.

“If you are properly restrained in the vehicle, you have a higher chance of surviving a crash,” he said.

Butte-Silver Bow Fire Department Capt. Bryan Cetraro, who is a registered emergency medical technician and child safety seat technician, agrees.

“Occupants wearing seatbelts and children in properly fitted and correctly installed safety seats have a greater chance of survival,” he said.

The Butte-Silver Bow Fire Department, Buckle Up Montana and the Butte-Silver Bow Health Department routinely team up to host monthly child passenger safety clinics on the third Wednesday of each month. (See break out box for clinic details.)

Since the crash, the Killoys said that they have found themselves in the role of seatbelt and child safety seat ambassadors.

“Anyone who rides with me knows that they have to put their seatbelt on,” Amber said.

And though he admits that he’d rather not be the center of attention, Brian said that it’s worth it to him to share his family’s story if the safety message changes the habits of even one person. He encourages other parents to take the extra few seconds to buckle their kids in every time they drive, no matter how hot, cranky or tired the kids get.

“No matter what the circumstances, don’t neglect the children,” he said. “This could happen to anyone.”