



Four receive 'Saved by Belt' awards

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Though many people might consider wearing a seat belt to be second nature, more than 2,300 Montanans have died in car crashes because they weren't buckled.

At a small ceremony Thursday, the Montana Highway Patrol, Tri-County Buckle Up Montana and the Montana Department of Transportation honored four people whose lives — and in some cases the lives of their children — were saved because they made the conscious decision to wear their seat belts.

"One month ago the Montana Department of Transportation kicked off a new initiative called Vision Zero," said MDT Director Mike Tooley.

The program features media and billboards that depict the often tragic losses that come from not buckling up. The program was implemented in an effort to reduce seat belt-related deaths in Montana to zero during the most deadly time of year: Memorial Day through Labor Day.

"I'd rather tell good stories, or hear about good stories," Tooley said Thursday. "These are real stories, these are real Montanans and this is what it's all about — driving towards zero deaths."

Troopers Mike Zufelt and Tom Kruse each honored two people whose lives were saved by their seat belts.

Zufelt presented Joshua Barrows and Nathan Ratley with Saved by the Belt awards for crashes that happened near the end of last year.

"Josh's crash was on Colorado Gulch," Zufelt said of the teenager. "The roads were just terrible slick, (he) went off the east side of the roadway, went through a fence and rolled his car.

"Because he wore a seat belt he walked away with no injuries," he said.

Ratley was traveling up Boulder hill in his company truck when he lost control of the vehicle and rolled it one and a half times before it came to rest on the passenger side.

"I thought I was dead," Ratley said after the ceremony Thursday. "It's definitely nice to make it through something like that."

His wife, Dawn Ratley, said she was terrified when she received the call that her husband was in an accident.

"His boss told me he flipped his truck," she said.

"I freaked out," she said. "My immediate thought was of the cliff part of Boulder Hill."

She was especially concerned considering her husband's sister-in-law had just died in an August motorcycle accident in Carmi, Illinois.

"I was expecting way worse," she said, remembering the overwhelming joy she felt when she heard his only injury was some dull neck pain.

Though the Ratleys admit they sometimes slip up and forget to buckle up as they drive around town, Nathan Ratley said his children — Jackson, 1, and Delia, 3 — are always buckled no matter what.

"I've always been lead-by-example," he said.

Kruse honored Kaci Garcia DaSilva and Jason Harris, whose potentially fatal accidents occurred on consecutive days in December 2013.

DaSilva was driving on I-15 just south of Montana City on Dec. 3 when she lost control of her vehicle on the slippery road.

"A single vehicle went off the road, traveled quite a ways off the road over a culvert and right into a giant ponderosa tree," Kruse said. "When I got up to the vehicle and looked inside, four children under the age of 5 were crying.

"You might look at me and say, 'That doesn't seem like a good thing,' but it was a great thing," he said. "I knew they were all responsive, awake and they're here again today because they were properly restrained."

DaSilva had to be extricated from the car using the "Jaws of Life" but told attendees Thursday that she was grateful for all the support she received both at the scene of the accident and in the months following.

"I guess some people might call it a heroic thing to wear a seat belt, but it's you guys who are the heroes and we're so thankful for you," she told Kruse.

The following day, Jason Harris was also driving along I-15 when he lost control of his vehicle and rolled it into a creek bed.

"I could see tracks in the snow leading off the road and down a steep embankment," Kruse said of Harris' wreck. "It (the vehicle) was submerged about halfway ... to the point where the driver and anybody behind them would've been fully submerged in the water."

Harris' young daughter was in a child restraint seat at the time of the crash and, unable to let herself out of the seat, would have drowned had Harris not been wearing his seat belt and able to quickly get out of the car to remove her and her brother.

"If you're not going to wear it for yourself, at least wear it for somebody who might be in the vehicle," Kruse said.

Harris said he was grateful for the award as well as the overall message presented by the Vision Zero campaign and others like it.

"Stories have an impact," Harris said. "The message helps save lives."

