



Three Forks teens receive award, talk about how seat belts saved their lives

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By SAMANTHA BOOTH, Chronicle Staff Writer |

THREE FORKS -- Dwayne Murphy, 18, and his sister Tiffany, 16, were driving to a graduation party near Churchill around 4 p.m. on May 30 when a gust of wind caught their pickup truck as they rounded a corner.

Dwayne, who was driving, overcorrected and the truck went off a 25-foot-high embankment, flipping over and landing upside down on its roof.

The accident could have been fatal.

But both Dwayne and Tiffany walked out of the Bozeman Deaconess Hospital emergency room a few hours later with only scrapes and bruises.

The two teens received "Saved by the Belt" awards from Buckle Up Greater Gallatin.

"In this case in particular, these kids were saved by their seatbelts, no doubt about it," said Stacy Wesen, assistant director of Buckle Up Greater Gallatin. "We like to recognize cases like this one because these kids were doing everything right. Sometimes you just can't avoid an accident."

For their mother, Dawn Murphy, the accident was the latest in a string of hardships. The family has lost one child to muscular dystrophy and another suffers from lung disease.

"I didn't even have to ask, I knew that alcohol wasn't involved," Dawn said. "They are just such good kids and they are very sensitive to our feelings."

Dwayne and Tiffany were nominated for the award by Sam Miller, BDH trauma coordinator.

"I get so many people coming in with injuries that could have been prevented," he said. "At 16 and 18, not a lot of kids are wearing seatbelts."

Buckle Up gives out a handful of "Saved by the Belt" awards each year. These were the first awards for 2010.

Montana is ranked 43rd in the U.S. for teen driving safety, in part due to insufficient seatbelt use and texting laws, according to a March 2010 U.S. News and World Report study.

"Kids think it's uncool to wear seatbelts, but you never know when it's your time so you should always be careful," Tiffany said.

Only 55 percent of Montana's high school students reported that they always wear their seatbelts when driving, according to the 2009 Montana Youth Behavior Risk Survey.

"Especially looking at younger drivers, who are usually less experienced and bigger risk takers, seatbelts are incredibly important,"

Wesen said.

Besides the Murphy family, a few members of the Three Forks community turned out to watch the awards ceremony, including Connie Hussung, who lost her son in a car accident in Three Forks in 2004.

"Happy occasions, just like sad occasions, are shared by the whole community. We all know each other and we are all here to support each other," Hussung said.

Dwayne said the accident was frightening, but he got right back in the saddle.

"When we first got in the accident, all I could think about was my sister. I just wanted to be sure that she was OK," Dwayne said. "But I work at a pizza place and I was back in the car delivering pizzas that week."

Tiffany will be a junior at Three Forks High School in September. Dwayne will be a freshman at Montana State University and plans to major in film and photography. He intends to commute to school from Three Forks.

"I've never been a big fan of driving, but I'm not worried about the commute. You shouldn't let one tragedy hold you back," he said.

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