



To hear Loren Vaillancourt's testimony about her brother, you can log on to distractions.org and click on the **FACES** button. You will be directed to a map, click on South Dakota and hear her tearful story.

Loren plans to continue her fight for banning distracted driving. She is working on her last year at South Dakota State where she will graduate with a degree in exercise science. "It's always going to be something near and dear to my heart."

importance of staying focused on driving and not becoming distracted. The one draw back to telling her story is that she becomes so emotional, but she says that sometimes that's the only way to get through to kids.

"It's the hardest thing to get through to them – Things like this do happen," she says.

In August, Loren returned from Washington where she did an internship with the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation, Ray LaHood. This was a great opportunity, she said to work with someone who was just as passionate about ending distracted driving.

Among the things she did, Loren said she had the chance to travel with Sec. LaHood to Syracuse, NY, to release the results of two pilot projects in Syracuse and Hartford, Conn. The projects measured the effect of increased law enforcement along with high-profile public education campaigns. The findings revealed that because of the increased law enforcement, use of cell phones and texting dramatically dropped.

"These findings show that strong laws, combined with highly-visible police enforcement, can significantly reduce dangerous texting and cell phone use behind the wheel," said Sec. LaHood in July.

Currently South Dakota does not have laws banning handheld cell phone use or texting. Loren is hoping that will change soon.

Earlier this year, she testified in Pierre on the importance of these laws. Unfortunately it didn't pass the House, but she says she will be back in Pierre for the next session to testify again.

"Hopefully we will get something passed before Congress passes a national law," she added.

In Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota, they passed bans on all cell phone use (handheld and hands-free) for novice drivers — meaning drivers under the age of 18 with a learner's permit or provisional license. They also passed bans on texting for all drivers.

One reason Loren and the USDOT are so focused on young drivers is because of the statistics.

According to the NHTSA, in 2009 16 percent of distracted drivers involved in fatal crashes were under the age of 20.

This is why it's important for families to sit down and talk about proper driving habits. If you think about it, everyone at some point has been distracted by a phone call, a conversation, or something else going on in the car.

The USDOT and NHTSA have created a website — www.distraction.gov — that offers great advice and tools for parents, schools and communities to use.

State Farm Insurance® and the National Youth Leadership Council® have also partnered to help decrease distracted driving. They have created Project Ignition — a program where schools and students work together to address the importance of safe driving. Grants are currently available for 2012, but the deadline is November 15, 2011. For more information on Project Ignition or to apply, you can check out www.sfprojectignition.com.

Distracted driving is obviously something that isn't going to change overnight, but through hard work and determination, maybe someday the numbers will significantly drop.

Loren can probably sum it up the best — "No text message or phone call is worth a life."

■ by Heidi Henson

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