

## A PAINFUL LESSON

A car accident on a dreary, rainy day in 1996 will be forever etched in one teen's mind.



**At Left — GOOD MEMORY:** Lori Laethle of Holdrege, Neb., celebrated her 16th birthday in 1996, just days before a car wreck that was her and her two passengers to the hospital.

**Below and Far Left — BEYOND REPAIR:** The accident totaled Lori's Ranger as well as a Chrysler LeBaron.

**Below Left — LUCKY:** Lori was lucky to escape with whiplash and a severely battered face.

BY LOBI L. LUTHEZE  
WORLD-HERALD CORRESPONDENT

Holdrege, Neb. — It was pouring, the sun smothered by cold, gray clouds. The first week of school was nearly over, with only lunch and two class periods between the students and the Labor Day weekend. At 11:45, the bell for lunch rang.

After sorting out where we would eat lunch, I headed for McDonald's.

I pulled to a stop at a stop sign across the highway from the restaurant.

"I locked left. The highway was clear. A few cars sped by from the right. I checked right again, straining forward to see past Marguerite and Laurie, who were crammed into the front seat of my small pickup truck. It was clear, with the next red traffic blocks away.

I pulled into the intersection, my tires spinning for a moment. I had crossed the two lanes of highway that ran to the east and the turning left. It was just crossing the first lane of highway that ran to the west when my tires began to spin.

Something made me turn my head to the right. That's when I saw the monstrous red pickup truck, its front bumper 10 feet from my car.

I turned back and stared at the McDonald's entrance. Oh, dear God, I thought, we're going to die in five seconds.

There was a sound unlike any I'd heard, shrieks of terror and pain, mingled with the clattering of glass and the screaming of crumpling steel. My head ricocheted back, then came rushing forward. There was a sickening crunch as my face smashed against the steering wheel.

Everything went black after my face contacted the steering wheel. I later learned that my truck was pushed into another car and that car was pushed up onto the curb and into the McDonald's exit sign.

"Oh, my God," someone was moaning. "Oh, my God, God."

"Can you feel my left leg?" I heard Laurie crying. "Oh, God, I'm feeling my leg."

I felt as though I was floating, my arms and legs unable to move, as if they weren't even there. So this is what it feels like to die, I thought as I lay there. Please, God, don't let me be dead.

Suddenly, pain exploded in my face. That's the closest I can come to describing what it felt like. It seared my eyes shut and choked back a scream of agony. I started to lean forward, but an eruption of pain shot up through my shoulder blades and into my neck. I lay back against the seat.

Marguerite was leaning forward, her head clutched between her hands.

"I can't feel my leg," Laurie cried. "Oh, God help me, I can't feel my leg."

"Are you OK?" Marguerite asked, meandering over so I could see her. Tears began coursing down my cheeks.

"I'm sorry," I sobbed. "I'm so sorry, you guys."

"It's not your fault," Marguerite said. "Don't worry, it's not your fault."

"Please, don't hate me," I cried. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I am so sorry."

I began to sob, my whole body shaking down my cheeks. I didn't want to cry then. This wasn't supposed to happen. I had too much to do. Laurie and I were supposed to meet with the freshman assigned to us for peer helpers. I was supposed to go to Kearney that weekend.



"It hurts to move my neck."  
"You just lie there really still, OK?" He reached over and turned off the ignition. The silence was deafening.  
"How are you?" he asked Marguerite.  
"I'm fine," she answered.  
"Can you tell me what happened?" he asked.  
"I took a deep breath."  
"Well," I said, unable to control the tremor in my voice. "I was at the stop sign across the street, by the liquor store. I started across. I was almost here, but my tires started spinning. I looked over and there was the red pickup."  
"What red pickup?" he asked.  
"The one that hit us," I said.  
"You didn't get hit by a red pickup. It was a brown LeBaron. Did you see a brown car?"  
"No, I saw a red pickup."  
"Where you buckled up?"  
I closed my eyes for a moment, wishing I could lie and tell him that we had all been wearing our seat belts.  
"Were you wearing a seat belt?"  
"No."  
"My leg," I heard Laurie sobbing to one of the police officers who had run around to her side of the truck. "My left leg. I can't feel it."  
Disregarding the pain, I turned my head. Marguerite was blocking my view, but I caught a glimpse of one of Laurie's blood-splattered cheeks. Please, God, let her be OK, I prayed. Let both of them be OK.  
My door opened again. This time a freshman poked his head inside.  
"How are you doing?" he asked.  
"My neck and my face hurt," I said.  
"OK," he said. "You held on just a second and we'll get you out of there."  
"Get a neck brace and a backboard over here," I heard him yell.  
I looked out the broken passenger window one last time and saw my mom standing with Marguerite's grandma in the McDonald's parking lot. Their eyes were filled with more pain than I could ever have imagined. I caused that pain. I thought, Marguerite's grandma is going to hate me. The whole family is going to hate me. I closed my eyes on my tears.  
The door opened again. "Now how are we going to do this?" someone muttered.  
"Very carefully," I said.  
"Put this behind her neck."  
"Be careful, don't move her head."  
"I got her," someone said. I felt a pair of hands softly cradle the back of my neck. "I'm going to brace your head still while they put the neck board on, OK?"  
"Yes," I muttered.  
"My face hurts," I said.  
"Anything else?" he asked.



"Can you tell me what hurts?"  
"My face and neck hurt," I said.  
"Where does your neck hurt?"  
"In the back, and down outside my shoulder blades."  
"She's ready," someone outside yelled, and a moment later Laurie was loaded into the ambulance beside me. I started to turn my head, but the paramos stopped me.  
"Keep still," he said, his fingers tightening against my neck.  
I closed my eyes and prayed as they slammed doors, still thinking that in a few minutes I would wake up covered in sweat in my own bedroom. I never wanted to open my eyes again. They rushed us to the hospital, the sirens wailing.  
It seemed an eternity before the doors were opened again. I stared up at the white-painted ceiling, the bright fluorescent lights rubbing off as they wheeled me down the corridor. I heard someone cry out my name as they wheeled me by and the tears began to flow again.  
"It was a blur. There were the never-ending questions about where it hurt and how bad it hurt, but the question that was most painful to answer was when they asked if we were wearing our seat belts."  
How was I supposed to explain it so they would understand? I always wear my seat belt. I'm a good driver. Everyone knows that you have to wear your seat belt when you ride in my car. Everyone knows that I'm the safest driver in Holdrege. I always wear my seat belt, except on holidays.  
I checked back a moment when a nurse dabbed some blood from my nose.  
"Ow, ow, ow," I cried. "That hurts."  
She gave me a sympathetic half-smile that made me feel like breaking into fresh tears. I bit my lip and held them in.  
"You sure smashed your nose a good one," she said.  
"Is it broken?" I asked.  
"No, it's just going to be really sore. You're gonna have a couple of days."  
"We need to get her into X-ray," the nurse said to the freeman. "Could you set her head down really carefully?"  
The freeman wiggled his fingers under my head and started to pull his hands away. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out.  
"Whoa, stop," the nurse cried. "Did that hurt?"  
I couldn't even answer. Tears flowed from the corner of my eyes.  
"Looks like I'm going with her," the freeman said smiling.  
They wheeled me into the X-ray room where I was positioned under the mammoth machine and covered with a heavy apron.  
"What's he doing in here?" I heard a nurse say.  
"He can't be in here."  
"It wasn't his fault," another nurse whispered. "He can't let go of her head until we find out if her neck is broken. We don't want her to move at all until we know."  
I pretended not to hear. A broken neck. I knew what that meant. Oh, I couldn't be paralyzed. This couldn't be the last day of my life when I would walk away. Why me? Why was this happening to me? Why wasn't I waking up? It wasn't fun anymore. It hurt too much. This sort of thing only happens to other people. Right?  
"Hey, don't get all excited," the freeman whispered. "You're going to be fine. I just saw it."  
I managed a weak smile.

"Now that's better," he said. "I thought I'd never see you smile."  
During the X-rays I was pulled and prodded and nudged all around. I gripped my teeth against the pain and tried to listen to the encouraging words the freeman kept whispering in my ear. After it was all over, a nurse came in and told him it was OK to let me go.  
"See, I told you you'd be all right," he whispered as they wheeled me back to the emergency room. "You just kept smiling."  
And with that, he was gone. I realized then that I didn't even know his name and I hadn't even had the chance to tell him thank you.  
My parents were waiting in the emergency room. They hugged me and inquired my health. As they were getting me ready to go home, Laurie's mom wheeled her back into the emergency room. She started to cry when she saw me lying there.

"I should slowly sit up in the chair. I should slowly walk to the mirror. I fought off a fresh batch of tears. My face was so swollen I could barely see the slits of my eyes. The pain in my nose was raw and angry. Looking in the mirror was painful and sticky looking under the harsh, fluorescent lights. Oh, dear Lord, don't let that be me. I thought as I stared in awe at the monster in the mirror.

Laurie's leg wasn't broken. Just bruised badly enough to require the use of crutches for a while. Marguerite had already gone home, with only bruises and abrasions and aching muscles. My diagnosis was whiplash and a severely bruised face.

By what miracle we even walked out of that hospital I'll never know.

The first day, my face was so swollen I could barely open my eyes. The emergency room nurse was right.

No one else was injured. The LeBaron and my Ranger were totaled, with the third car suffering only a slightly bent fender. The leaning McDonald's sign became a landmark.

The scars. Not on the outside, but scars in the memory and scars in the soul.

They are scars that make me look my seat belt each time I get into a vehicle, whether I'm going two blocks or two hundred miles. They are scars that make me check and double-check instructions before I cross. And they are scars that make my stomach tie into painful knots each time I hear the wailing of a siren on a gray, rainy day.

The accident seemed unreal until I saw my pickup with its mangled passenger door. I went back to look at it before they towed it away, just to remind myself how lucky I am to be alive — how lucky the three of us are.

I had dozens of visitors, including friends from work and school and even Marguerite and her family. I was glad to know that they care, but it broke my heart to know I had hurt them. I still feel guilty about what happened. I always will.

I'll always wonder if, somewhere down in their hearts, they all blame me for what happened. I will never stop apologizing, and I will never forget the worst pain of the whole accident — knowing that I was the cause of someone else's pain.

I don't know how many times I've repeated the story of that day, but I don't mind. People need to be aware that accidents can happen to anyone, even the most cautious of drivers.

Now that my bruises are gone, how many people will remember? How long will it be before they stop looking at me with pity in the hallway? Will they remember my battered face, Laurie limping on crutches or Marguerite's tangled eyes when they get behind the wheel of their own vehicles?

It all happened so quickly. People at school still call me "Crash," and vivid nightmares sometimes wake me to know that they care. I have pictures to remind me of my day: Friday, Aug. 30, 1996, 11 days after my 16th birthday. I have pictures of my truck, the LeBaron and my battered face.

I don't think I'll ever need them, though. I will remember it always, that day in the rain.