

When I was a younger teenager, I lived my life as most of my friends did—happy and carefree, devouring life and dreaming of big futures. However, on December 24th, Christmas Eve 2014, I received an overdose of reality, and I realized that life can be incredibly cruel and unkind. It was from this day forward that I learned to hold my loved ones close. Truthfully, I have never felt heartbreak to the degree I experienced as I did when I received the news that my close friend James, and his older sister, Morgan were killed by a teenage driver who was texting while driving.

On Christmas Eve of 2014, my whole perspective on life changed. I shall always remember this particular day in December, for it was upon this diabolical day that a large portion of my spirit perished. I was at a tennis tournament in Houston, and my cell phone suddenly unleashed its strident call. My ears were soon met with the voice of a friend's mom who relayed to me that my friend had perished in a gruesome car accident caused by a teenager who was texting while trying to drive. My heart was immediately torn to shreds. Never has such an event penetrated so deeply and painfully into my heart. I remember lying in bed crying to my mom, and continuously asking how this could have happened to such good, kindhearted young man who brought so much joy into everyone's lives. I could not wrap my head around this tragedy, and it felt like a terrible dream from which I could not awaken. I had never in a million years thought that this would have happened to someone who had meant so much to me. Because of this horrible event, I never take out my phone while I am driving. I will pull over if I truly need to answer a text. In fact, any time my phone rings, I am not even tempted because I think of James and his sister, and a sinking feeling of sadness overcomes my entity.

I remember a couple of days before the accident, I was playing a friendly game of tennis with James on a starry, clear night at Doornbo's Park in Nederland. He was filled with charisma and had me laughing—virtually in stitches with his quick wit and dry sense of humor. I was also working on a Interact Club service project with him that same week, and then all of a sudden, a week later, I felt like I had been robbed of my friend by the icy fingers of reality. This left me numb, angry, and incredibly sad. The fact that my friend had been taken away from all of his friends and loved ones in just a matter of hours, caused feelings to well up inside me that ranged from angry, to confused to extreme sadness. I have learned so many things from this experience. At the mere age of fourteen, I was forced to grasp what distracted driving can really do to another human being, especially when that person climbs behind the wheel of a car and starts to drive. After this experience happened to James, I knew that I never wanted this to happen again to anyone else, and I wanted to do more than just sit back and mourn. When the opportunity arose, I signed up to speak out against distracted driving at the junior high and elementary schools in Nederland, TX. to raise awareness of the negative effects of texting and driving. When I was a sophomore, I applied to be a part of the T.N.T club at my school, as I knew that through this club, I would have the opportunity to speak to younger children in the community, so that I could help them understand the effects of distracted driving on a deeper level. I enjoyed getting to talk to the children in my community about James and his sister, and I enjoyed sharing stories about them and how driving distracted affects numerous people. Soon, I was elected to be the vice president of both the Interact Club and the T.N.T. Club, and I have made sure to participate in service projects that will allow me to speak out and warn people what can happen if a person texts while driving. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about my friend. Maybe these small children will grow up to be responsible drivers as a result of hearing my story.

Many people choose to define themselves by only a few turning points in their lives. However, it is my passionate belief that life does not speak its voice through the culminating periods of value, but its voluminous song instead resounds through the small and often banal events of our existence. Although glory and triumph may find manifestation through various climaxes of defined days, our most difficult memories and the shaping of our entities often transpire when something negative happens to a loved-one. James would have graduated with me this year, so he has been in my

thoughts quite often. The clearest memories I have of my friend are the times when we would go to tennis tournaments and work together on service projects. At the time, I took these moments for granted, but they are now the threads that sew together my heart and soul. Every time I hear my friends laughing and playing on the tennis court, it feels as if I am hearing the ubiquitous voice of James calling out to me, and I do not feel alone. I know that James is alive in my heart and mind, and I think about him every day. I am forever grateful to have such a beautiful guardian angel, and in his memory, I will continue to speak out against the deleterious effects of distracted driving.