

Statement of Carrie Thornton

Your college years are the times of your life that you constantly reminisce about and dream of returning to. My two best friends, Lauren Braddy and Christin Lancaster were living the typical college life. These two girls were 21 year-old senior Kappa Delta pledge sisters attending the University of Alabama with me. They had one month of college to finish and were ready to embark on the journeys ahead of them, or as I like to call it “working in the real world”. Christen was thrilled to start working as a kindergarten teacher and Lauren was ready to take on New York City.

Their plans changed about 4 months ago on a sunny Florida afternoon when they were traveling down interstate 95 heading to Ft. Lauderdale to celebrate graduation and one last Spring Break with their pledge sisters. Lauren was driving her 1997 Isuzu Rodeo with her friend Maggie riding in the front passenger seat and Christen and Hannah riding in the back, all were wearing seatbelts except for Christen. All of a sudden, Lauren came across tire debris in the road and instinctively swerved to dodge it. An everyday driving maneuver to avoid the road debris placed the lives of these four women’s in the hands of the SUV. The Rodeo flipped several times before coming to a stop. Christen had already been ejected and lay lifeless on the grass where she was later pronounced dead. Inside the SUV, Lauren had been crushed by the roof and was thrown across the front seat onto Maggie’s lap gasping for her last breaths. The internal bleeding had already begun. Maggie McGinnis recalled Lauren whispering, “I can’t breathe” over and over again as Maggie herself, lay in the car in what the hospital later reported as, “critical condition.” Both girls were airlifted to the hospital where Lauren’s mother held her little girl’s hand one last time before sending her into surgery. Lauren never came out. The roof crush caused internal bleeding far too severe for survival.

The reason I am here today is because I am angry. As I have become more aware of the dangers of SUVs and their high probability of rollovers and their lack of proper roof strength, I have come to the realization that this terrible tragedy could have been prevented. My two best friends didn’t have to die. Not only did they miss out on graduation, but they missed out on life; there will never be any weddings and there will never be any children. The roof crushing in on Lauren’s head didn’t have to happen, and the rollover itself that ejected Christen from the SUV should not have occurred. The safety technologies that are readily available that possibly could have prevented their deaths are not being provided as standard equipment on most SUVs today.

Here is a shocking fact about myself that I would like to share with you—in my 20 years of living, the only adolescent deaths I have had to cope with have been the result of car crashes. No drug overdoses, no suicides, not even cancer, but car crashes—the leading cause of death for young Americans. I stand in front of you today representing the lives that could have been saved and the families and friends that have survived them. With the safety provisions in the Senate version of the surface transportation reauthorization legislation now in conference, my generation will be better informed about and protected from the inherent dangers of driving Sport Utility Vehicles. A sudden swerve does not have to have such devastating and deadly results.

As an advocate for stronger highway and auto safety laws, I, along with the Braddy-Lancaster Foundation, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, and many other organizations support the safety provisions of Senate bill 1072. Lauren Braddy and Christin Lancaster never came home and neither should members of Congress until they adopt these urgently needed safety provisions. Time is of the essence, and Congress needs to act now.