

Statement of Dena Parker, Childress, Texas
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety Press Conference
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My name is Dena Parker and I have traveled here from Childress, Texas with my husband Patrick to tell you about how our life together took a devastating turn on the morning of August 29, 2001. On that morning, Patrick, on his way to Wichita Falls to go to work, was injured when he swerved and avoided a deer, and then while correcting, hit a second deer on the front corner of the truck. The truck rolled immediately upon impact, with the cab crushing and breaking his neck.

The rollover itself did not hurt my husband. It was the roof crushing in on him that broke his neck, nearly severing his spinal cord, and rendering him a quadriplegic—Patrick was only 37 years old.

Each morning now, it takes three hours to help him get up, eat breakfast, take a shower and get dressed. He has chronic nerve pain in his legs and has described the pain as feeling like skin is being ripped off, like he's in a microwave oven. There are no words to describe what it's like to watch the one you love suffer and be unable to help him. To understand the nightmare of this injury, you must live it, though no one should have to. Everyday you wake up hoping something, anything, will make it better.

As time passed, I began to hear about other stories of people involved in rollover crashes, some walking away, some, like my husband, not. I started researching and began to understand fully how my husband never had a chance. I learned about how the auto industry has refused to act on the knowledge and facts they had about the insufficient roof strength standard it currently uses for its SUVs and pick-up trucks. I learned that if a vehicle's gross weight is more than 6,000 pounds, it doesn't have to meet any roof crush standard, although the auto manufacturer claimed by husband's work truck did. I learned that the federal government has stood by knowing that the safety standard was inadequate and yet, did not act to improve it to protect occupants in a rollover crash. I know now that there are foreign automakers that have testing that better simulates the circumstances involving a real rollover, thereby enabling people to walk away from rollover accidents. A rollover standard should simulate actual rollover conditions, regardless if it is a dynamic or a static test. I read that Ford owns Volvo, and later found out about the Volvo XC90, which has a roof that can hold well over three times the vehicle's weight and beats the United States' roof crush standard by more than 100 percent. Finally, I know that if my husband had been in a vehicle such as that, he would have walked away, but he was not so fortunate, and now our lives are forever changed.

His vehicle was unreasonably and unnecessarily dangerous and my husband never had a chance. The roof crush standard in our country has not been upgraded since 1972 –32 years ago. There have been so many advances in technology to protect Americans and yet automakers follow an unsafe and old standard on new cars. People hear advertisements from automakers as they watch the commercials on TV about how strong and safe their trucks and cars are built. But, the auto industry has used excuses all these years NOT to do the right thing. There is a simple solution to avoid debilitating injuries like Patrick's. Congress needs to pass legislation directing action by the federal government to upgrade the roof strength standard and require automakers to manufacture safer cars that protect occupants in a rollover crash.

Knowing that there must be thousands of others with similar stories—and there are—we set up a website and started a petition that now contains over 600 names, some of whom have told similar stories of death and devastating injuries to loved ones or themselves.

My husband and I made a long and arduous journey from Texas to be here today to tell you our story. It was a difficult trip, because we had to drive, since Patrick is unable to fly. But if our journey and our message can prevent the tragedy that has befallen our family from happening to others, then we know it has been worth the struggle to be here today. We traveled thousands of miles to be here today. We call on Congress to pass the auto safety provisions in the federal transportation bill and send them a few blocks away to the White House so others will be saved.

Thank you.