

Every Fifteen Minutes

By Julius Durham

I am sitting in the driver's seat. I'm wondering, listening, aware of my breathing; I'm covered in thick sticky blood. My best friend sitting behind me is frantically calling 911. She gets out of the car only to see me almost unconscious; our car has slammed head-on into another car. I open my eyes and begin to scream out her name: "Carissa! Carissa! What's going on?" I see someone run up to me; his face covered in blood. He falls to his knees sobbing, clutching me through the shattered window as the ambulance arrives. I realize he is my boyfriend as Carissa pulls him off of my body. The paramedics use the Jaws of Life to get me out of the crushed car. Glass falls on me and digs into my skin; I squeeze my eyes shut as I am strapped into a stretcher. As I am being carried into the ambulance, I open my eyes and see the entire Junior and Senior class of my high school watching. I see my classmates' faces paralyzed with shock and my closest friends' eyes filled with tears. We all get a taste of what it would be like to die at the hands of a drunk driver.

This crash, although simulated rather than real, changed my life forever. Before the crash, all of us involved in the Every 15 Minutes program gathered in the gym. The whole room was filled with smiles and laughter as friends said hello and teachers joked around with their students. The "crash kids" all sat down and got our make up done. We had fake blood poured on us, and fake gashes and broken bones glued to our skin. It looked as if the gym had been transformed from a room filled with joyful students to a room filled with the cast of a

zombie movie. As we lined up to go out to the crash site, my stomach was flip-flopping. I knew this would be dramatic, and I was nervous to be doing this in front of so many people. As my cheer coaches set us all in our positions and covered the cars with a tarp, I reminded myself to just breathe and stay calm.

The crash happened so fast it felt as if I was seeing things happen but was not a part of the action. The paramedics talked to me as if I was really a crash victim, but I couldn't respond. I was taken by ambulance to the emergency room. My parents were notified, and they rushed to the hospital. They were escorted into the room where I was

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strapped to the stretcher and covered in a sheet. I had been declared dead. The doctor removed the sheet, and my parents held each other as they cried. Both of them kissed my forehead. Then, they said goodbye and that they loved me. Tears rolled down my face, but I couldn't speak to them; I couldn't hug them back and tell them that everything was going to be all right. They were escorted out of the room, and I was taken back to school. That was the last time they would see me for the next two days.

When all the participants were reunited in the gym, we were no longer smiling, laughing, and joking with each other. The room was now cold and quiet. Many of us had been crying, and many of us were in shock. We were taken to a hotel and escorted to a conference room. There we were introduced to the adults in charge of the Every 15 Minutes program: the local law enforcement officials and



DOMINIC'S DESIGNATED DRIVER



volunteers who had been affected by drunk driving. This was the longest, most emotional night of my life. We were kept in that conference room from 1:00 in the afternoon until 3:00 the next morning. My head was filled with other people's catastrophic accounts of drunk driving accidents. All of these emotions from my fellow students and the speakers were filling the room, as if at any moment the room would overflow and all of us would flow out with it. I could relate to so many stories. They were kids just like me, they partied just like me, and I could have died or been in jail just like them.

After nine hours of physical and mental exhaustion, we were handed a piece of paper and a pencil and given one last assignment. At the top of the paper were the words

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"Dear Mom and Dad, today I died and I didn't get the chance to say . . ." We were told to write a letter to someone we love and to tell that person what we would have said if this were real. I looked around the room and saw everyone was busy writing their letters. I just looked down at my blank paper and thought. I thought about my childhood and all the wonderful memories I had of my parents and me. How was I supposed to put all of that down on a piece of paper? How was I supposed to express how much I loved them in a simple letter? First, I wrote to my mom and thanked her for spending countless hours with me, baking and listening to all of my stories about my friends. Then, I addressed my dad and thanked him for all of the adventures he provided, for always acting silly even when I didn't appreciate it, and for always protecting me. I was so relieved that I had not actually died—that I got to go home and be reunited with my friends and family.

The next morning we all came down to the lobby, our bags packed. We were all dressed in black. We were off to the funeral. One by one we all walked into the gym, put our flowers on the symbolic casket, and sat in the chairs alongside. I looked in the audience to find my friends and my family. They did not smile, and they did not wave. The whole gym was filled sadness. We listened to speeches and stories and listened to the advisors tell the students what the rest of us had gone through the night before. I was sad, and I was tired, and I thought there were no longer any more tears in me; I was sure that I could not take any more emotions. Then they started the video. It was of our school and all of

the kids at lunch and in the halls, and I was excited to see something happy. But then the video changed. It showed the crash . . . and me

at the hospital. It showed my boyfriend getting arrested and booked for killing me and another girl while driving under the influence. It was awful. To see everything we did played out all together made it seem even more real.

The Every 15 Minutes program turned me into a different person. It opened my eyes to the common dangers of drinking and driving. It gave me a sense of responsibility. For the rest of my time in high school, I made sure that I was the designated driver to and from every party and that I was able to take home anyone who needed a ride. I took countless rings of keys and made sure everyone had a safe plan for the night. Some kids thought it was annoying or that I was overreacting, but what I had experienced was so real to me that I wanted to make sure it would never actually happen to anyone else.