

AAA makes seat-belt law a top priority

By Jamie Coelho

It was Fourth of July weekend 2006, and Beatriz Fuentes of Springfield, Mass., and her 21-year-old daughter, Natalie DeLeon, were watching fireworks blast off from the neighbors' house that evening with her daughter's boyfriend. Sparks landed next door and they could feel their own home shake.

Then DeLeon got a call from a friend.

"Bye Mami. I'm going to go out for a little bit, but I will be back soon," she said.

DeLeon and her boyfriend got into the Volkswagen Jetta, backed out of the driveway and rode off. Little did

Fuentes know that less than five miles from her home, the foundation of her family would be rocked forever.

Shortly after the couple left, Fuentes got an urgent call from the local hospital. There had been an accident and her daughter and her daughter's boyfriend were involved. Fuentes convinced herself that Natalie would be fine. After all, this had happened before, and her daughter had survived.

As she opened the front door to her house, she saw a police officer.

"At first, I just walked right by him ... but then I stopped and turned around, and I said, 'you tell me right now – is my daughter dead or alive?'" Fuentes said. "Then all I could say was, 'I already know,'" she said. "I already knew."

Later, at the hospital, she found out that the couple had been involved in a rollover crash at the intersection of

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Natalie DeLeon was killed in a 2006 car crash.

Seat belt

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and Savoy Avenue in Springfield. The passenger window had been rolled down on that hot summer day, and her daughter had not been wearing a seat belt. Fuentes said her daughter's boyfriend, the driver, who survived, told her he had just looked to the side to talk to DeLeon for a second. In that moment, the car slammed into the car in front of it, rolled up on a curb and plowed through a blue post office mailbox. Alcohol and speeding were not involved; DeLeon had been killed because she was ejected from the vehicle and suffered a fatal traumatic brain injury.

The most tragic thing for the mother is that her death could have been prevented. "If our state had a primary seat-belt law, Natalie would still be here today," Fuentes said.

A primary seat-belt law would allow police to pull over vehicles solely because occupants are not wearing seat belts. Massachusetts and Rhode Island have secondary seat-belt laws, which means that there must be a first offense – such as speeding or ignoring a red light – for a vehicle to be stopped by police.

Thirty states, plus the District of Columbia, have enacted primary seat-belt laws, and the national average is 85-percent compliance, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Currently, the seat-belt usage rate is 78-percent in Rhode Island, and 74-percent in Massachusetts, two of the lowest rates in the country. Connecticut, with a primary law in place, boasts 88-percent compliance. Research estimates that a national rise of just 1-percent can save more than 220 lives a year.

AAA's senior vice president of public and government affairs, Lloyd Albert, and director of public and legislative affairs Mary Maguire are advocating at both state houses alongside traffic safety, law enforcement and government officials, and other groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving. In Massachusetts, Maguire



After losing her daughter in a car crash, Beatriz Fuentes became a crusader for a primary seat-belt law in Massachusetts.

co-chairs Belts Ensure a Safer Tomorrow – all in an effort to help persuade government officials to pass primary seat-belt laws and save lives. They hold press conferences and speak at driving schools and high schools to help stress how many deaths and traumatic injuries could be prevented – and how much health-care-related costs could be saved – each year, by passing this bill.

"When a state passes primary seat-belt legislation, usage is shown to increase at least 10 percent. In Rhode Island, that translates to a usage rate above 85 percent that could save about four lives a year, and prevent hundreds of traumatic and costly injuries," Albert said.

Research shows that a 10-percent rise in Massachusetts could save another 18 lives and prevent more than 650 traumatic injuries.

Fuentes insists that a seat belt would have saved her daughter's life, because it had done so before. DeLeon had been involved in a car crash in 2003, when she was 17 years old. DeLeon had broken her arm and leg, shattered her wrist, sustained a head injury and a black eye – but the wound that had most affected her mother was the diagonal black-and-blue welt that stretched from her shoulder across her chest to her hip, where her seat belt had restrained the force of thousands of pounds of pressure and kept her alive.

For drivers and front-seat passengers, wearing a seat belt reduces the chance of

being killed in a car crash by nearly 50 percent; for rear-seat occupants, it's 75 percent, according to the national highway administration.

"Seat belts do more than just keep you from getting hurt; they also keep you in the car," said AAA traffic safety manager John Paul, who explained that a 200-pound person traveling 60 miles per hour will exert nearly 12,000 pounds of force in a crash. "Nearly three out of four people who don't wear their seat belts, and who get ejected from a car, will die."

Why DeLeon had not been belted in the 2006 crash, Fuentes doesn't know.

Two weeks after her daughter's death, the mother was compelled to do something, "so that Natalie would not die in vain," she said. Fuentes, who is Latina, then worked with the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts to form the bilingual seat-belt campaign group called "The Friends of Natalie" with Natalie's two sisters. A billboard with a photo of DeLeon was created and displayed with the Spanish phrase "Abrochate!" (buckle up) on Interstate 91 in Springfield, where drivers could see it, make a connection, and, hopefully, buckle up.

After all Fuentes' work, the Massachusetts primary seat-belt bill is called "Natalie's Bill."

A Facebook page called "I support a primary seat-belt law in Massachusetts," was also created through the BEST coalition, of which Fuentes is a member. Every time there is a fatal injury reported from an unbelted crash in Massachusetts, it is announced on the page's wall, along with links to the news stories.

AAA is hopeful that this will be the year a primary seat-belt law is passed in both states.

"It's an honor and a privileged to do meaningful work that enables me to make a difference by potentially saving lives and health care dollars," Maguire said.

Added Fuentes, "It may be too late for Natalie, but not for others who do not have to die. This is for all the Natalie's out there." 