

Together WITH farmers

Join us on the Journey

Learn More (https://togetherwithfarmers.org?utm_campaign=2021-09-together-with-...)



Life after the crash

Leave a Comment (<https://ofbf.org/2021/03/03/life-after-crash-leah-fullenkamp/#comments>)

The silence was deafening. How bad was the accident near the family farm, Leah Fullenkamp asked over and over again in calls to friends and family. The Shelby County Farm Bureau (<https://ofbf.org/counties/shelby/>) member had seen a post about it on Facebook, and immobilized by foot



(https://ofbf.org/app/uploads/2021/03/Leah_Fullenkamp.jpg)

“Dad’s Tree” is planted at the Fullenkamp house. The evergreen planted in John’s memory is adorned with bird feeder, pipe cleaner fruit loops shaped like hearts his children have made.

how fast she was going down the road — they did a re-enactment of the crash. At first you don’t think it’s a lot but then when you actually count 16 seconds and think about how fast 60 miles per hour is ...,” Leah said, her voice trailing off and a sigh completing her thoughts as her mind went back to that fatal day on June 16, 2018.

surgery the day before, she couldn’t jump into the car and check it out. Those who answered the phone said they’d find out and call her back. Others simply didn’t answer when they saw who was calling. The answer Leah wanted — and dreaded — came three hours later when her mother-in-law showed up at the door with news that would shake her to the core and change her life forever.

Leah’s husband, John, had been killed when the tractor and sprayer he was driving was hit from behind by a Cadillac Escalade. The driver told police she had been shopping on her cell phone on a straight stretch of state Route 29 in Shelby County, distracted by sales at J.C. Penney. In an instant, Leah had lost her high school sweetheart and father of her children, leaving her a widow at age 33 and single mother to four children ages 9 and under.

“Sixteen seconds and 59 miles per hour. That’s how long she was distracted and

The days after

Life after the crash was full of sorrow and fear of both the unknown and for Leah's young children. The Father's Day present so carefully wrapped by the 9-year-old was set aside, never to be opened. Hidden under beds were some of John's personal items as his children desperately tried to keep his memory alive. Leah, an elementary school teacher, relied on her trauma training to help her children cope. Days were filled with endless tears and a strange notoriety in Fort Laramie where "literally every single person knew who we were and what had happened," she said. The month of June, a celebration of the couple's anniversary, Leah's birthday and Father's Day, became a black mark on the calendar.

"Instead of celebrating John as a wonderful hands-on dad on Father's Day, we were planning his funeral that morning," Leah said, lamenting the irony.

An unexpected visitor

In the months after the crash, the family had an unexpected visitor — a single fly that would flit around the family as if listening in on their conversation. It would gently land on a hand and allow it to be passed from one hand to another. The fly was especially noticeable on difficult days like Christmas, birthdays and school delay days.

"Whenever somebody would be talking about John, the fly would come. It was bizarre to the point where you could not not notice it," Leah said. Intrigued by the fly's constant presence, she researched the meaning of a fly visiting her broken family.

"What stood out the most was that a fly can thrive and survive in a (crappy) situation and that's where we were," she said. "My life had changed in 24 hours and it wasn't because of something I did or didn't do. It was out of my control. When I stopped teaching, I needed something to do or I'd lose my mind."

(https://ofbf.org/app/uploads/2021/03/Leah_Fullenkamp_Jan12_2021_13.jpg)

In the Blink of a Fly



Leah found inspiration in that solitary fly. Using a play-on-words of the phrase “in the blink of an eye,” she started a distracted driving education campaign and named it “In the Blink of a Fly.” (<https://intheblinkofafly.com/>) She set up a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/intheblinkofafly/>) and blog (<https://intheblinkofafly.com/my-why/>) where she shared her family’s journey of life without John. A presentation at Fairlawn High School about the dangers of distracted driving led other schools to invite her to do similar presentations. When another tractor-vehicle accident happened near the spot where her husband died, Leah was distraught. “I lost my mind — how is this a thing?” she asked.

That’s when she came up with the idea of putting up a billboard near the accident site. She reached out to a township trustee about getting a permit, and he suggested she contact Shelby County Farm Bureau for a donation to help offset the cost of the billboard. Inspired by her story, the county Farm Bureau embraced Leah’s efforts, reaching out to members and

businesses for donations and running its campaign through the Ohio Farm Bureau Foundation (<https://ofbf.org/foundation/>). The \$2,000 needed for the billboard swelled to more than \$8,000.

“Shelby County Farm Bureau jumped on it right away and helped out a lot,” Leah said. “They put in their quarterly newsletter about the billboard, and the number of people who reached out in support was amazing. Seth Middleton, who is the county Farm Bureau president, even donated the trailer that the billboard is on.”

Last October the billboard went up near the intersection of state Route 29 and Fort Loramie-Swanders Road. Big, bold letters spell out the message: “Eyes Up, Phone Down” and “It Can Wait.” Scattered around the county are hundreds of yard signs with a similar message, and cars are filled with static cling fly decals as a reminder of the dangers of distracted driving.

“This was a great cause for Shelby County Farm Bureau to embrace because road safety is always a concern for farmers. We’re now working with Leah on putting up another sign on a Farm Bureau member’s property along Interstate 75,” said Jill Smith, the county Farm Bureau’s organization director.

For Leah, driving down the stretch of road from her house to the family farm is unavoidable and painful. But it’s where she and John, an electrical engineer, had decided to put down roots because they wanted to raise their children in the country and dreamed of owning their own farm.

“Farming was John’s passion and he often worked during the night and weekend helping on the family farm. We were in the process of starting our own farm when he died,” she said. “I’d like to think that he’d appreciate what I’m doing to keep his memory alive and help prevent a tragedy for someone else. Whenever I see a fly, I think of John and the strength I need every day to survive and hopefully one day to thrive.”

To learn more, visit intheblinkofafly.com (<http://intheblinkofafly.com>).

Amy Beth Graves is a freelance writer from Upper Arlington.

Drive Safely

Spring planting is around the corner. Be mindful of farm equipment moving from field to field.

Here are a few tips to pass farm equipment safely:

- Be cautious of farm equipment turning left onto driveways or fields. They may first pull right for wide turns.
- Pass farm equipment only if conditions are safe and no on-coming traffic.
- Farm equipment operators may pull over on the shoulder of the road if safe to do so.
- Farm equipment operators may move to the center to avoid objects on the road shoulder.
- Do not pass farm equipment on the yellow line, curves or hills.
- Be patient.

Source: National Ag Safety Database

Leave a Comment (<https://ofbf.org/2021/03/03/life-after-crash-leah-fullenkamp/#comments>)