

## **Kristina Lakey – 2017 Michigan Auto Law Car Accident Injury Scholarship**

The morning of December 14th, 2015 started out like most others. I woke my three-year-old son Gabriel up and got him ready for his half day at preschool. I dropped him off and came back to pick him up a few hours later, and he came running up to me with open arms excitedly saying “mommy.” I had spent that morning loading up our car as we were going to be making the 12-hour drive from Las Vegas, NV to Homedale, ID that day to visit my mother and father for my son’s 4th birthday and Christmas.

When we left Las Vegas, I had to make a decision between the shorter route of taking United States Highway 93 that stretches from Las Vegas to Twin Falls Idaho or Interstate 15 that stretches from Las Vegas to Pocatello, ID. I chose the shorter route. Little did I know that would later turn out to be a bad choice. We stopped in Wells, NV for a bite to eat and I decided to continue to Twin Falls before stopping for the night. That too was a bad decision. At around 9:00 pm 8 miles north of Hollister, ID, less than 30 min from Twin Falls, ID, I hit an area of low visibility. The road was covered in snow and ice, and there was snow blowing across the highway. I was driving at a very low rate of speed and clinging to the side of the highway. At 9:16 pm our small Ford Fiesta was struck head-on by another vehicle that had crossed over the centerline.

I’ll never forget that moment of impact. The sound of cracking glass, the crunching of the car and the sound of my voice screaming out for my son who was seated in the backseat. Our car was thrown off of the highway by the force of the crash. The moment it stopped all I could think about was my son. I didn’t hear him crying. That was a bad sign, and I knew that it was. My door wouldn’t open so I crawled across the car and out the other side into the snow. I opened the door and looked at my son. My son had blood coming from his nose and his mouth. He was not responsive to touch and had a very faint pulse. Several other drivers stopped to help, and one of them was an off-duty EMT. As the off-duty, EMT walked over I realized I couldn’t feel my son’s pulse and I became extremely faint. I remember waking up with someone holding my neck still in the front seat. I heard the good Samaritans that stopped to help tell the EMTs that arrived that my son no longer had a pulse. I remember becoming combative at that point, and I was screaming, “Save my baby, if my baby is dead, I don’t want to live anymore. Leave me here. Let me die!” I can still hear the sound of my car horn going off in the background and the chill of the snow that night. They wouldn’t allow me to see my son, as they didn’t know the extent of my injuries.

I remember being transported to the hospital in Twin Falls and having to call my mother to tell her that my son had died and that she needed to come to Twin Falls to be with me. I remember having to deliver the news of my son’s death to his dad’s family after we had all already suffered the loss of his father to a motorcycle crash just four years prior. It was the absolute worst night of my life. I remember sobbing in the hospital waiting for my mom to make the 2-hour drive from Homedale to Twin Falls.

The crash was caused by a teen driver who was driving at a speed that was unsafe for the road conditions that night and he had chosen to cross into my lane purposely to avoid a snowdrift on his side of the road. He took my son's life in an instant and forever changed my life and the lives of each one of my family members. My son was killed just a week before his 4th birthday. I had to plan his memorial service instead of his fourth birthday party. Every day following his death killed me a little more. I'll never forget hugging my son's cold body at the funeral home and having to decide whether or not he would be put in a tiny coffin or a tiny urn.

The day after my son's memorial service was his birthday. I had to check into West Valley Medical Center's Mental Hospital because I couldn't cope with the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Complicated Grief. In the spring following my son's death I petitioned the Idaho State Transportation Department to make U.S. Highway 93 safer by making centerline more visible in bad weather. The petition, on [change.org](http://change.org), made the local news in Twin Falls and they held a public forum to decide what changes should be made. I also contacted the Department of Highway Safety in regards to my son's child safety seat and his death in hopes that in the future they can make car seats that better protect young children like my son.

The past year since my son's death I have struggled to find a reason to live but returning to college was the best thing I could have done. I changed majors from elementary education to Biology with a minor in Neuroscience. I hope to research spinal cord regeneration and I plan to pursue graduate school as well as Medical School. Due to changing majors, I will no longer have Pell grant eligibility starting in 2017-2018. I have less than two years left until I complete the requirements for my major and my minor. As for physical injuries in the crash, I sustained a head trauma and continued to suffer from severe headaches following the crash. I also had whiplash related injuries. However, those physical injuries are nothing compared to losing my child. The grief while it may change over time will never absolve. The grief is, unfortunately, a lifetime sentence. I hope to make the world a better place and I will also continue to advocate for child car seat safety and the benefits of extended rear facing child seats.