In July of 2007, two young men left a bar together, best friends with young families and bright futures. The driver was buckled, and at first, so was the passenger. Then, on a good faith act of trust in his friend’s driving, the passenger unbuckled his seat belt. Within minutes, the car left the road and rolled several times. The unbelted passenger was ejected. He died from his injuries. The belted driver was unharmed.

One bad decision and one brief moment forever changed the lives of these young men and their families. If the passenger had been wearing his seat belt, he would not have died. Though the car was crushed end-to-end, within the safety cage there was room at the head, feet and sides of the passenger seat. There was room to LIVE.

The video of this tragic story has been seen by thousands of people around the nation since it was produced by the Montana Department of Transportation in 2008. The many responses to the video prompted MDT to develop a traveling display intended to save lives and preserve Montana families. This life-saving display, called “Respect the Cage - Buckle Up” is one way MDT has committed to reducing injuries and deaths in Montana. Wearing your seat belt every time you get into a vehicle is the single most effective way to do that. It only takes two seconds, please, buckle up for life.

Facts about wearing your seat belt

• Not wearing your seat belt doubles your chances of being seriously hurt in a crash.
• Seat belts and air bags are meant to work together. The presence of air bags in a vehicle doesn’t mean seat belts are unnecessary.
• Seat belts protect the head and spinal cord from impacts inside the vehicle such as with the steering wheel and windshield.
• Buckling up on every trip – not just the long distance ones – can save your life.
• Pickups have a high fatality rate because occupants of pickups are less likely to wear seat belts and pickups and SUV’s are more likely to roll over than passenger cars.
• Pickup fatalities have the lowest usage rate (19% use vs. 36.8% usage in passenger cars).
• In MT, from 2006-2008, 81% of those killed in a crash while riding in a pickup were not wearing seat belts.
• For light truck occupants, safety belts reduce the risk of death by 60% and moderate to critical injury by 65%.
• In 2008, 174 vehicle occupants died in car crashes on Montana roads and 3 out of every 4 of these people were not buckled. In all likelihood, most, if not all of the 80 people who were killed because they were partially or completely ejected would be alive today if wearing a seat belt.
• 64% of unrestrained vehicle occupants in Montana were ejected from their vehicle and killed in 2008.
• Restraints prevent ejections. Ejected occupants are 4 times as likely to die and 14 times as likely to sustain spinal cord injuries.
• In 2008, 79.3% of occupants in vehicles used seat belts on all roads in Montana. Seat belt use is highest on Interstate highways and lowest on county roads and in-town.
• According to a study done for MT in 2008, caring for unbelted patients costs over $36.7 million each year in direct inpatient health care costs. Uninsured or Medicaid covered unbelted occupants cost the state of Montana over $14 million annually for the hospital care of their preventable injuries.
• The economic loss to Montana in 2007 was estimated to be $662 million, which is an average of over $690 for every citizen in Montana.

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Visit www.respectthecage.com to find out when and where the “Respect the Cage” exhibit will be next.