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'I still have a lot to offer,' columnist says after traumatic brain injury

By Katie Lauer klauer@postbulletin.com Nov 13, 2018 Updated 22 hrs ago



Emily Steffens, middle, and her parents, Melanie and Larry Dobson. Emily writes a column for the Star Herald and was recently given the "Special Recognition Award" by the Towards Zero Deaths program in Mankato.

Contributed

"I felt alone and sad and scary and sick and not right at all," Emily Steffens, of Dodge Center, wrote in her award-winning newspaper column Oct. 31. "I felt like I had no meaning in my life."

The 37-year-old writes a weekly column, "It's My Life – Living with Severe Traumatic Brain Injury," for the Star Herald in Dodge Center, about her life after she was in a car crash without a seat belt in 1999.

"Writing my column helps me see that my life is still good," she continued to write. "I still have a lot to offer."

That column not only earned her a first-place columnist award from the Minnesota Newspaper Association, but she was most recently given the "Special Recognition Award" by the Towards Zero Deaths program in Mankato on Oct. 23.

"She was the last one to be announced, people stood up and applauded," Steffens' mother, Melanie Dobson, said. "It was very cool and very affirming for her. In spite of everything, there's good coming out of it, and she's making an impact."

Melanie also said that she is the most complimented contributor to their paper, often being the first thing people say they read.

The column touches on everything from simple bike rides and family visits to personal issues and emotions that stem from life after the accident.

The summer after high school graduation, Steffens was in the back seat of a car traveling to the Twin Cities – without a seat belt – when the car she was in collided with an RV that pulled out in front of them.

While Dobson said it was conventional wisdom to think a seatbelt wasn't needed in the backseat during the time, Steffens said it was a one-off instance that she didn't wear one.



Emily Steffens' senior photo

The then-18-year-old was in a coma for two months, fought for her life in intensive care, worked through months of therapy and has dealt with permanent injuries since, including paralysis on her right side and significant memory issues.

Melanie said that due to the nature of brain injuries, especially severe ones, there can be additional daily struggles.

“Every day, (Steffens) might say something like, ‘I wish my life were different,’ or ‘When’s my right hand going to work?’” she said. “But then she’ll turn around and say ‘At least I’m still alive.’ She really has the gift of joy, which affects other people also.”

Steffens started the column two years ago after a prompt from her father, Larry Dobson, the Star Herald and Byron Review publisher.

“Emily talks a lot about using seat belts, and she talks a lot about what she wants and how her life has changed,” Dobson said. “She was feeling kind of useless and down, and it occurred to me that maybe she could do a column and share what she was saying.”

Steffens thought it was a good idea to express her thoughts, but that wasn’t the entire point; She has a passion to shine a light on how important seat belts can be and what can happen if they aren’t used.

“It’s such a simple thing, but it’s so very important,” Steffens said. “I wish everyone would know that I would be so different right now if I had just worn my seatbelt that day. Without Jesus, I wouldn’t be here.”

According to a report by the Department of Public Safety’s Office of Traffic Safety, there were 348 traffic deaths in 2017 — 80 of which included unbelted motorists.

While the total number of deaths was the lowest since 1943, groups like Towards Zero Deaths are trying to get to that number: 0. It's people like Steffens who continually work to share the importance of seat belts and road safety.

When it comes to the actual process of writing her column, she said it is a team effort.

"Larry and I do a lot together," Steffens said. "He's my go-to man."

Dobson and Steffens will usually talk about subjects over a walk, and then he'll transcribe her answers to questions he asks her later. Steffens will then type and edit those answers.

It seemed like an obvious fit since both her parents working at the newspaper, but that act of expressing herself isn't novel.

While in high school in Sleepy Eye, the co-valedictorian was active in plays, often getting lead roles. She was also a cheerleader, on the dance team, and went to state in both speech and mock trial.

"It's fun to express myself any way possible," Steffens said.

But no matter how much she enjoys working on and writing her award-winning "It's My Life" column, she said it's all about promoting the importance of seat belts.

"I want more people to know that brain injuries are something we have to deal with, even though we didn't intend to do (life) the way we thought we would," Steffens said. "It's still good that we have stuff we can do to make life better for other people."

Katie Lauer

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Katie joined the Post Bulletin in June 2018. She graduated from the University of Minnesota with a BA in journalism and has written for the Pioneer Press, Minnesota Daily and Lillie News. She is always thinking about coffee, concerts and C.J. Cregg.