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The Deadly Toll of Road Debris

By Sandee LaMotte, CNN

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(CNN) — On June 6, 2006, 29-year-old Matthew Reif of Phoenix lost his life in a car accident. The killer? A small piece of unsecured scrap metal that flew off the truck ahead of him, smashing through his windshield. "It impaled his heart, killing him instantly," said his father, Paul Reif. "Someone was hauling a load of junk, and it wasn't secured properly. "He was living his life, as healthy as could be," said Reif, crying softly. "Then suddenly, poof. I guess we have to be thankful there was no suffering."

Robin Abel's 24-year-old daughter, Maria Federici, was luckier. She didn't die in 2004 when a piece of particle board escaped from the back of a rented trailer and broke her windshield. Instead, she was nearly decapitated as the debris crushed every bone in her face. "At first, they told me she wouldn't survive," Abel said as she too broke into tears. "I donated her organs that night, and then they called and said 'come back; she's still alive.' "

Her recovery was long and painful. Maria had seven surgeries and had to learn to swallow, talk and walk again. She is also blind. "When you see what someone has to live through and what they have to endure because of such a simple thing --securing a load on a car -- it's very heartbreakin," said Abel.

If you think these terrible tragedies are freak accidents, think again. According to a new study by the [AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety](#), road debris played a role in more than 200,000 crashes reported to police from 2011 to 2014, killing more than 500 people and injuring another 39,000. AAA says that's a 40% increase since 2001, when the foundation first studied the problem. The AAA numbers echo a [Government Accountability Office study from 2012](#). Based on data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the GAO found higher numbers: 440 deaths and 10,000 injuries in 2010 due to accidents involving unsecured loads.

Seattle Times link <http://www.seattletimes.com/news/womans-crusade-against-unsecured-loads-leads-to-national-law/>

Woman's crusade against unsecured loads leads to national law

By [Christine Clarridge](#) Seattle Times staff reporter

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More than a decade after Robin Abel's daughter was blinded by a piece of particle board that flew from the back of a rented moving trailer, Abel saw the president sign a transportation bill on Friday that addresses the risks of unsecured loads.

It's been more than a decade since Robin Abel's only child, Maria Federici, was blinded and nearly killed by a piece of particle board that flew out of a rented moving trailer, struck the 24-year-old's windshield and sheared off her face.

Since then, Abel has worked almost nonstop to educate lawmakers, businesses and individuals about the dangers of driving with unsecured loads.

On Friday, Abel allowed herself to enjoy a celebratory moment as President Obama signed a five-year National Transportation bill that included what Abel calls "my paragraph."

It states: "The Committee is concerned about the dangers posed by unsecured loads on noncommercial vehicles. Federal grant funds for state-run safety campaigns raising awareness about the dangers posed by unsecured loads are currently eligible under State Highway Safety Programs (23 U.S.C. 402). Therefore, the Committee encourages states to address unsecured loads the next time they submit their State Highway Safety Program for approval by the Secretary."

It seems like such a simple, and perhaps even obvious, acknowledgment of the dangers posed by unsecured loads and highway debris, but it has been a long, arduous and sometimes lonely and frustrating campaign for Abel.

"As sad as it is what happened to my family, I know that I have made a difference and that's what keeps me going," said the 61-year-old former banker turned activist. "I know that my work has saved lives and will save lives, and I know that I am the right person for this mission because nobody cared about this more than me."

Abel was asleep at her home on Lake Kathleen in Renton on Feb. 22, 2004, when she got a call from Harborview Medical Center. Her daughter, then 24 and a graduate of the University of Washington, had been injured in an accident and was not expected to survive. Federici had been driving home on Interstate 405 when a piece of wood flew out of the back of a rented U-Haul trailer and through Federici's windshield.

The driver of the car pulling the trailer — who was tracked down by police through a fingerprint on the board — had been moving all day, was tired and had failed to properly secure the items in the trailer, police told Abel later.

At the time, there was no law addressing the consequences of poorly secured

loads and the driver was cited for a traffic infraction and fined.

Abel said former King County Prosecuting Attorney Norm Maleng encouraged her to fight for a new law. “Norm told me to tell my story, to keep it personal and that people would care,” she said. “And he was right. I know that after people hear me talk, they will never look at the road the same way again.”

In 2005, Washington legislators adopted what has been called [“Maria’s Law,”](#) which criminalizes a person’s failure to properly secure a load that results in injury or death.

But that was not enough for Abel. She went on to educate businesses, county officials, drivers, anyone who would listen.

In March, Abel was presented with the Department of Transportation’s National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Public Service Award for her effort to bring “awareness to unsecured loads and roadway debris risks to motor vehicles on a local, state, and national level.”

Federici, who [won more than \\$15 million in a lawsuit](#) against U-Haul, has gone on to live her own life. She bought a house and got married. According to Abel, she is happy but does not share her mother’s mission.

“She doesn’t want to do this, and that’s OK,” Abel said. “But I cannot help what I do either. I don’t feel I can rest until everyone knows the dangers and how to secure their load,” she said.

Her next step is to work with states to show them what has worked in this state.

On Friday, just before she headed off to an appointment, she couldn’t resist sending one more email.

“One thing I want the public to know is that ALL items need to be ‘securely fastened’ and often drivers don’t understand that. They think if the load is heavy or light or crammed in, it is good to go. That is not the case. There should be nothing loose in the back of your truck; it must all be securely fastened.”

Tips: Secure Your load

- Use a tarp. Covering items with a large, sturdy tarp is often a good way to secure a load. Remember to make sure the tarp is securely fastened to the vehicle.
- Tie the load down. Use rope, netting, straps or chains to tie large items

directly to your vehicle.

- Layer the load. Put lighter items at the bottom and heavier items on top to help keep them in place. Don't forget to secure the heavy items to your vehicle.
- Don't overload it! Cramming too much stuff onto a vehicle increases the risk of items shifting, sliding or falling onto the roadway.

Check it once, then check it again. Double check that items are securely anchored down and any tarps are tied to the vehicle.

“Secure your load as if everyone you love is driving in the vehicle behind you.” Robin Abel

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