



Room to live

© Copyright 2007 Fox 9 News/KMSP-TV, Eden Prairie, Minn., Reporter: Trish Van Pilsum.

Video: Fox9 Minneapolis investigative reporter Trish Van Pilsum on camera in news studio

Audio: You can only cover so many fatal crashes in which grieving family members swear their loves ones always wore a seatbelt before you start to wonder a couple of things. Do people actually wear seatbelts as often as they say, or is life so cruel that the one and only time they don't wear a seatbelt is the time they roll the car? Either way, there's no undoing the fatal mistake.

Video: Van Pilsum climbing into wrecked cars

Audio: At first it's eerie to climb into a car in which someone has died. But then I realized they didn't actually die here, but in the ditch or on the road. If they'd stayed here they might not be dead at all, which is the point of all this.

Video: Portrait of pretty young lady, Brianna Reamer

Audio: Voice of Brianna's Mother "This one mistake cost her life".

Video: Roadside crucifix adorned with flowers, roadside crash scene, Brianna's mother

Audio: it's hard to imagine the grief that follows a traffic death... Brianna's mother – "We're going to have to find a new normal – learn how to live without her." ...getting any worse.

Brianna's mother – "We mourn the loss of her, but we also mourn the loss of our dreams for her."

Video: Brianna's mangled car, Brianna's father

Audio: But, when you see a car like Brianna Reamer's...
Brianna's father - "It just adds to the list of things you suffer through."

Video: Another mangled car

Audio: ...or like the one sitting in Don Rasmussen's tow lot, Voice of Don Rasmussen – "You see a lot of it over the years." ...and you think... Rasmussen – "Dozens of people that certainly would have lived."

Video: Rasmussen looking at wrecked car

Audio: "had they had their seatbelts on."

Video: Roadside crash site with flowers, Rasmussen looking at a wrecked car

Audio: ...that maybe this person didn't have to die. It's enough to make you cry. Rasmussen – "I get... I'm too emotional for this... When young people die it's harder." And he doesn't even know the people. He just tows the cars and hears the stories.

Video: Richard Reins uncovering a wrecked car on his property

Audio: Stories like this one. Richard Reins has kept his son's car. Reins – "I kept it just to prove a point." His son Dillon and Dillon's girlfriend died when the car rolled and they were thrown. Reins – "You can't believe it, I know he was a seatbelt person and I believe she was too."

Video: Police warehouse containing wrecked vehicles from fatal crashes

Audio: Three months ago Fox 9 investigators asked the Minnesota state patrol and every county sheriff in the state to tell us when someone was killed or seriously hurt when they were thrown from their car and this usually meant a roll-over crash.

Video: *Minnesota state trooper in warehouse with wrecked cars*

Audio: "It's tumbling like a football. Footballs have that end for end tumble."

Video: *Van Pilsum getting into wrecked car*

Audio: Whenever possible I inspected each car and climbed inside.

Video: *Van Pilsum on camera in wrecked car*

Audio: In this crash, the car did exactly what it was designed to do. It absorbed all of the impact on the outside of the car and here on the inside especially in the passenger area it's largely intact. There is room at my head, room at my sides, room all around, there was room to live. If only the young girl riding here had been buckled safely in the car

Video: *Traffic footage*

Audio: What exactly does "Room to Live" mean? The way cars are designed has changed. They're built with what's called "crumple zones".

Video: *crash test footage*

Audio: In any kind of crash the front and back ends absorb the energy created by impact by compressing. In a roll over the ends compress, the windshield often shatters, the sides of the car may bend in some but the occupant area is supposed to hold up. Safety folks call this area the cage. And for good reason – it is

remarkably strong and if you're wearing your seatbelt it will hold you inside.

Video: Minnesota state trooper, Brianna's crumpled car

Audio: Trooper – “This is what they're gearing for is protection of the occupants.” Fly out of that protective cage and there's nothing between you and the ground. Trooper – “They don't get dumped in a pile right there. As the vehicle comes back up they get pitched out on the high side.” “I have not come across a crash yet where the people would have been better off ejected.”

Video: Police team investigating an accident scene

Audio: The state patrol was working this roll-over crash Just outside Mankato earlier this month. Trooper working scene – “It appears as though the occupant was ejected due to the vault or the roll-over. The vehicle then appeared to have landed on the roadway on top of the driver

Video: Van Pilsum sitting in car trooper was describing, montage of cars wrecked in roll-overs where someone died

Audio: In this car too there was room to live if only the drive had stayed in the car. That was true in every roll-over crash we investigated - Every single one.

Video: Van Pilsum getting into wrecked Hummer

Audio: This Hummer didn't hold up well in a high speed roll-over. The front and back ends literally sheared off, but just look at the cage that could have protected the driver.

Video: Van Pilsum on camera in wrecked Hummer

Audio: For the driver who was not wearing a seatbelt there may well have been room to live

Video: Van Pilsum climbing into a wrecked pickup truck

Audio: How about this pickup, no seatbelt for the driver, he flew out the window.

Video: Van Pilsum on camera in pickup

Audio: Look at all this room around me. The Cab of this pickup is largely intact. This is room to live.

Video: Tow driver Don Rasmussen working

Audio: In Faribault we came to see one car, but the owner of Glen's towing, Don Rasmussen, has got more for us than that. Like a lot of experience...

Video: Don Rasmussen in lot of towing company

Audio: Rasmussen - I've been here for forty some years so I've seen a lot of accidents." ...The wisdom that comes with that... Rasmussen - "A lot of times friends will come, look at the car and say "Man, I told her she's supposed to wear a seatbelt."" ...and not one, but two cars to show us. This is the first

Video: Van Pilsum climbing into wrecked car

Audio: A young mother died when the car rolled and she was pitched out.

Video: Van Pilsum on camera in wrecked car

Audio: But look, if she'd stayed inside, she probably wouldn't even have bumped her head. There's room to live.

It is a short walk to the second car.

Rasmussen - "It's the same type of situation except it was a straight road but he lost control, went in the ditch flipped her over, couple times I'd say."

Video: Van Pilsum getting into second car

Audio: The damage to the two cars is nearly identical. Inside there is plenty of room to live and guess what, this driver did. Why? He was wearing a seatbelt. Rasmussen – “I saw no injuries at all. Y’know he was walking around out there.”

Video: Split screen showing the two cars looking almost identical

Audio: And the contrast between these two crashes says it all. Rasmussen – “This one here was just a few days ago.” Van Pilsum asking Rasmussen – So when you look at this and you look at that what do you think? Rasmussen – “If only... if only... y’know, buckle up.”

Video: portrait of Brianna Reamer, crash scene, Brianna’s parents sitting on a couch together

Audio: If only, two of the most painful words a family can utter. Buckle up, two of the most powerful. Brianna Reamer’s family has said them all. Brianna’s father -“We always taught her – wear your seatbelt.”

Video: Van Pilsum getting into Brianna’s car – speaking on camera.

Audio: This is what Brianna Reamer’s car looks like. If she had stayed seat belted inside, she probably would have bumped her head, but there is plenty of room to live. Instead, she was thrown part way out the back window and the car landed on top of her.

Video: Richard Reins standing near his son’s wrecked car

Audio: Richard Reins - “One time is all it takes. I tell the kids, you let your guard down one time and the messenger of misery will jump on your back.” Only the misery is not your own

Video: Portrait of Brianna, Brianna’s father

Audio: Someday I wanted to walk her down the isle when she was getting married, not walk her down the isle in a casket.

Video: *montage of portrait of Brianna, wrecked cars and quick cuts of Van Pilsum sitting in various wrecked cars*

Audio: If only... There is room to live. ...she had buckled up. There is room to live. If only... Room to live. ...any of them had. There is definitely room to live. Room to live. Room to live.

Video: *Van Pilsum on camera in news studio*

Audio: I've often said that if people saw what I've seen they'd wear a seatbelt every time. Now you've seen it. If you want more information on the importance of seatbelts go to my Fox 9 dot com. Click on news, then on "The investigators" I'm Trish Van Pilsum for "The Investigators".

###