

Reader's Digest

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HEALTHIER

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MORE

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SAVVY

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READER'S DIGEST
1ST DAY

TEEN DRIVERS AT RISK
Smart fixes that save lives



August
2008
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JOSEPH K. VETTER WITH FRAN LOSTYS

Car crashes are the No. 1 killer of teenagers. It's time to take action.

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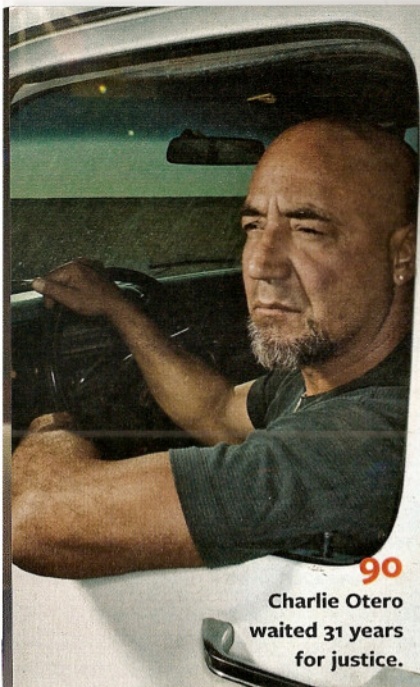
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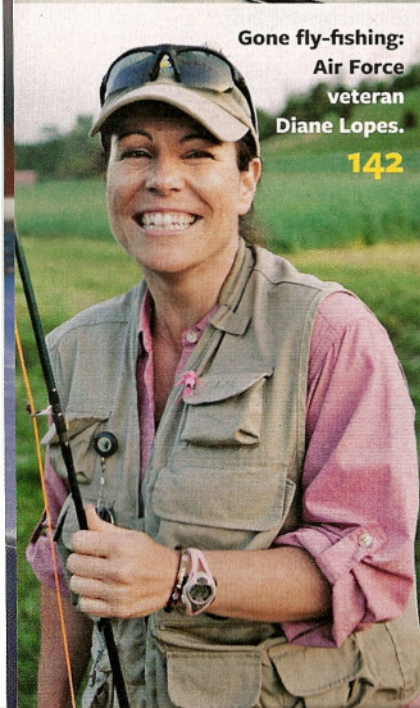
CARL M. CANNON

Wounded soldiers have somewhere new to go for healing—a riverbank.



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Charlie Otero
waited 31 years
for justice.



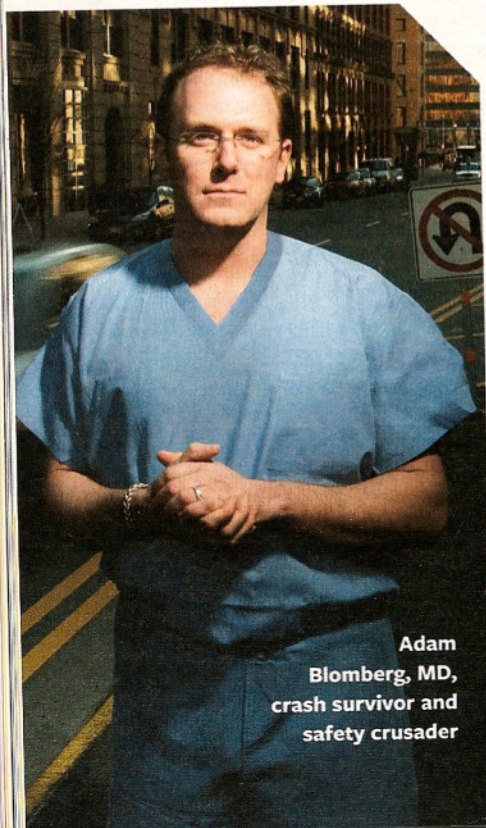
Gone fly-fishing:
Air Force
veteran
Diane Lopes.

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ROAD WARRIOR

ONE MAN'S MISSION TO GET
TEENS TO THINK TWICE EVERY
TIME THEY GET IN A CAR

BY LINDA TRISCHITTA



Adam
Blomberg, MD,
crash survivor and
safety crusader

"I was just like you—I thought I was invincible," says Adam Blomberg, standing before 400 students in a darkened auditorium at Miami's Coral Reef Senior High School. A photo of a bloodied and unconscious teenager, a breathing tube protruding from his mouth, flashes on the wall.

"That was me," he says. There's a collective gasp before the room grows silent and Blomberg, 31, an anesthesiologist who trained at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, begins the story of what happened one night in February 1995.

Blomberg, then the 18-year-old captain of the track team and a math ace at Cooper City High, near Fort Lauderdale, had been headed to a University of Miami basketball game with four friends. He was sitting in the backseat, reaching for his seat belt, as

the van pulled away from a gas station and collided with an oncoming car. Blomberg was thrown 40 feet through the rear left window, landing headfirst on the asphalt. He broke nine ribs, suffered a collapsed lung, and, of greatest

concern, bruised the left side of his brain, where a blood clot formed. His friends and the other driver escaped with minor injuries.

When Blomberg's mother, Mara Young, now a 59-year-old preschool teacher, arrived at the intensive care unit, so many bandages covered her son that she didn't know where to kiss him. He was in a coma and on a respirator. A four-inch strip of stitches held his scalp together. As she began filling out forms, a hospital worker asked if her son was an organ donor.

Blomberg, listed as a "possible fatality," awoke from his coma two days later. His doctors told Young that his injuries would almost certainly lead to a lifetime of disabilities.

Young didn't tell her son the grim prognosis. When his track coach came to the hospital to visit, Blomberg promised him he'd run in the district meet that spring.

Blomberg had inherited his father's stubborn will. Ron Blomberg, 59, was a former New York Yankee and the

game's first designated hitter. He soon arrived from Atlanta, where he'd moved after his divorce, to join the vigil at his son's bedside. Nine days after arriving in the ER, Adam was well enough to go home.

His doctors ordered three months of bed rest. The tubes had left his vocal cords irritated, so at first he had a hard time speaking. "But as soon as he could talk well," Young remembers, "he said, 'I'm going to give back.'"

It was his last semester of high school, but schoolwork was impossible. His doctors instructed him

not to read so he wouldn't tax his brain, still threatened by the clot. "I

went from doing calculus to coloring in a coloring book," he says. During the day, he often nodded off mid-sentence. At night, when his own screams woke him, his

stepfather, Mark Young,

would hurry in to rub down

his aching limbs and back. He poured his energy into rehab. Three months after the crash, he got his surgeon's okay to join his track team at the district meet. That day, he led the warm-up jog. But later, watching a videotape, he realized he hadn't been running at all. Instead, he'd shuffled around the track, his teammates walking silently behind him.

Even so, there were positive signs: The clot had dissolved, and his blood pressure and heart rate were stable.

"I'M
TRYING TO
SAVE LIVES,
ONE TEENAGER
AT A TIME."

In April he returned to school, and in June he graduated with his class. He was one credit short, but the administration let it slide.

“When Adam was two and a half, he told my father, a surgeon, that he wanted to be a doctor—and he never wavered,” Mara Young says. The University of Miami had awarded Blomberg an academic scholarship before the accident, and though his neuropsychologist didn’t think he’d be ready to attend, Blomberg had other plans. He set up a conference call with his physicians and the university, insisting he be allowed to enroll. UM honored the scholarship.

The premed major took only three courses at first. He tape-recorded his classes and listened to them over and over, trying to drill the information into his unreliable memory. “It would take me nine hours to comprehend a one-hour lecture,” Blomberg says. As time went on, the work grew easier.

During his junior year, Blomberg found a way to honor the promise he’d made after his accident. While volunteering at UM’s William Lehman Injury Research Center, he realized that sharing his own story would be a way to help others.

He created a presentation illustrating the dangers of behaving irresponsibly in a car, from not buckling up to speeding to driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs. He tracked down photos of teen crash victims from the center’s archives, then incorporated statistics and his own ex-

perience. He spoke the first time to a local Boy Scout troop and was soon giving his talk, “A Survivor’s Story,” at high schools around the state.

The Blomberg family had reason to celebrate. Adam had fully recovered and was on his way to fulfilling his lifelong dream of becoming a doctor. But in January 2000, Blomberg’s 22-year-old stepbrother, Michael, was killed in a crash while driving to his Atlanta home late one night. He wasn’t wearing a seat belt.

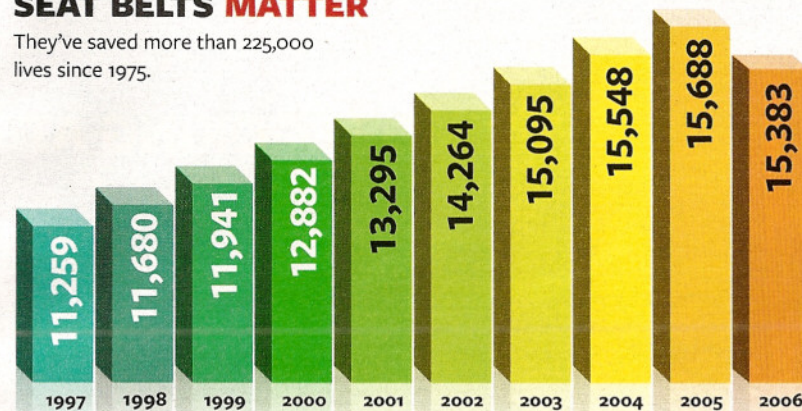
After the accident, Blomberg stopped telling his story to crowds, racked with guilt over his inability to reach Michael. If Blomberg had failed his own brother, he reasoned, how could he possibly make a difference to a roomful of strangers? Requests from schools continued to roll in, but he turned down every one.

Then Blomberg got a call from a high school counselor. As he started into his standard excuse—lack of time—he looked across the room at a stack of thank-you notes from students who had heard him speak. He realized that Michael’s death was only further proof that kids needed to hear what he had to say. He agreed to visit the school and began contacting others on the waiting list for his talks.

Midway into Blomberg’s 45-minute speech at Coral Reef High, Michael’s photo, with his birth and death dates, flashes onto the screen. Some kids tear up; all of them listen silently. “My family went through not only my experi-

SEAT BELTS MATTER

They’ve saved more than 225,000 lives since 1975.



SOURCE: NHTSA

ence but also my brother’s,” he says. “We lived the horror twice. It can happen to anyone.”

Morgue and accident photos appear while Blomberg tells the teens’ stories. All the deaths are the result of actions kids can relate to: fiddling with the radio, driving too fast, drinking, and, as with Adam and Michael, failing to fasten a seat belt. A slide shows a car wrapped around a tree, followed by another of a high school senior in a body bag. He’d been driving in a residential neighborhood at night with his younger sister in the passenger seat. As the driver changed the radio station, he lost control and smashed into the tree. Both siblings died.

“I realize I may not be able to persuade all of you,” he says, “but if I can reach just one of you, it’s worthwhile.”

Blomberg leaves the school hoping he has changed someone’s behavior. He recalls a letter he received from a

student who heard him speak and got into a crash later that same day but was unharmed. “She told me she was wearing her seat belt because of me.”

Letters like this reinforce his belief that he survived the accident for a reason. “There are a lot of physicians in the world, and we all save lives,” he says. “I have a special opportunity to save lives not just as a doctor but also as a human being.”



Find out more about Adam Blomberg’s cause at drivingresponsibly.com.

DO MORE

Join *Reader’s Digest’s* fight to make driving safer for teens. Contact your state legislators and tell them you support tough graduated driver licensing laws, as well as strict laws on DUI and seat belts. Find your state legislators at congress.org, and go to rd.com/teendriving to download a letter you can send.