

February 13, 2017

Dear Chairman Lively, and members of the Committee,

For the record, we are John Cole and Tanya Stinson, from Myrtle Creek. We are very excited that you will be considering HB 3404 to require families to keep kids rear facing in car seats until age two. We think this law will be an important way to help parents protect their children.

We care about this issue deeply, because our son, Lucas, suffered a critical injury while travelling in a forward facing car safety seat. And while we know that the seat saved his life, we also know that his many injuries could have been prevented if we had known about how much safer rear facing car seats can be for kids.

We would like to share our story with you to help you better understand how important we feel this legislation is. October 22, 2016 was the day before Lucas' third birthday. We always made sure that Lucas travelled in his car seat, but we had turned him from rear- to forward-facing after his first birthday, partially because his doctor said we could. On the afternoon of the 22nd, we had just had a birthday party in Myrtle Creek for Lucas. After the party, Lucas left with his grandparents and 19 year old aunt (John's parents and sister), to travel to Eagle Creek. Lucas was buckled into his car seat, and everyone else was wearing their seat belt. We knew the trip would take about three-and-a-half hours, and when four hours passed without word from them, we began to worry.

They drove North in I-5, taking exit to highway 211 at Woodburn. On highway 211, between milepost 18-19, they were travelling at 55 MPH with cruise control, when a car going the other way at 85 MPH crossed the centerline and hit them on the driver's side. We got phone call from Oregon State Police who told us there was an accident, and that everyone was life-flighted. We went numb, and just got into the car and drove up to Portland. John's sister died in the crash. His mother suffered 21 fractures, and endured multiple operations. John's father suffered a broken foot and multiple lacerations. They both survived.

When we arrived at OHSU hospital, Lucas was still in the Emergency Department. We were told he had suffered an "Internal decapitation"- basically the top two bones of his spinal column separated and one slid forward, severely injuring his spinal cord, and leaving him at risk of permanent disability, or worse. When we were allowed to see him, he had a breathing tube in his mouth, and was in a c-collar. We were told to be prepared to leave the room quickly in case they had to resuscitate him again. Once he was stable, he went to the Pediatric ICU, and he had a halo put on that night. The halo is not what we would have imagined- it was described to us as a collar to stabilize his head- using pins that were attached to his skull. So much stuff was going through our heads, seeing it was unreal, and it really hit us. Lucas had surgery the next day- his third birthday- to stabilize the spine with a bone graft and a number of screws into his spine.

The surgery was successful, and he was able to have the breathing removed the next day. Soon, he moved to room 1027 North at Doernbecher.

We were in the hospital about a week-and-a-half-.Lucas had significant swallowing trouble as a result of his injuries, and he had to have a feeding tube through his nose and needed to be fed with a pump. We also needed a suction machine because he had trouble swallowing his saliva.

Lucas is doing well, is finally able to swallow better, and had the halo taken off last month. This has changed all of our lives- John has not worked since then because he has needed to care for Lucas, as well as his parents.

The message that we want to leave you with is that every child deserves the chance to be their best- and you never know when anyone could have an accident. You can be the safest parent in the world, but you never know if someone else will make a mistake. Lucas was three years old, and we know that if we had been aware of how much a difference rear facing could make, we would have done it. Changing the law to require rear facing until two will help protect precious lives. How many two year olds know the difference between riding forward and backwards- the parents are the ones who push it. There is lack of knowledge out there for all the parents; we thought Lucas was safe. Lucas's whole life has changed, If this law help parents learn how to better protect their kids, than maybe other children won't have to suffer like Lucas has.

We can tell you that if we had known, he would have been rear facing still, and he could have blown out his candles on his third birthday.

Respectfully submitted,

John Cole and Tanya Stinson
971-282-2024