

Life

“I was paralyzed by a drunk driver!”

Chelsie, 20, and her friends thought nothing could hurt them. But after a dangerous crash, her whole life turned upside down. as told to Ashley Mateo



PHOTO: CHRISTA RENEE. HAIR AND MAKEUP: ELIZABETH CHANG FOR MAKE UP FOR EVER. 17 FYI SOURCE: INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY. FATALITY FACTS; TEENAGERS 2009.

It was 2 A.M. on a cold Saturday, and a bunch of us were crammed in my friend's car. Aaron was driving and we were rapping along to someone's iPod on the way home from a small party, where my best friend and I had spent the whole night gossiping about guys and dancing to hip-hop. I love to dance—four months earlier, I'd won a regional dance competition and qualified for Nationals. I'd had a few beers but I wasn't drunk. As the party wound down, Aaron announced he was heading out, and a bunch of us jumped in the car. I'd seen him drinking during the night, but I trusted him—I didn't think he'd be driving if he was really drunk.

On the way to my house, Aaron was driving a little fast and veered off the road a couple times. We laughed it off, but I was glad I had my seat belt on. All of a sudden, Aaron took a sharp turn, swerved, then hit a curb. Before I had time to think, he jerked the car in the opposite direction. Things quickly went from fun to terrifying. A jolt of panic shot through my body as we headed straight for a tree! I heard a boom and the car shook as we smashed into it. I didn't even have time to scream.

The next few minutes felt like a dream. I was weirdly calm. I didn't even cry. My seat belt was still on, but my legs were stuck under the driver's seat and my body was over the center console. I could hear EMTs talking and a helicopter landing to airlift us to the hospital—but everything felt foggy. Then I blacked out.

a new reality

The first time I woke up, my dad was standing over me looking scared. I didn't want him to worry, so I said, "Daddy, I'll be okay. I just can't feel my legs." I must have passed out again, because the next time I opened my eyes, I was in an MRI machine. My eye was swollen shut, so I couldn't see. I hit the top with my fists, thinking I was in a coffin.

The next week was a haze of surgeries and drugs. Then, the doctor matter-of-factly told me I'd never walk and, even worse, dance again. I couldn't process it—how was I going to live without dancing?!? I was in the hospital for almost two months and had three operations—on my back, my stomach, and my broken pinkie. The seat belt severed the nerves and muscles at my waist.

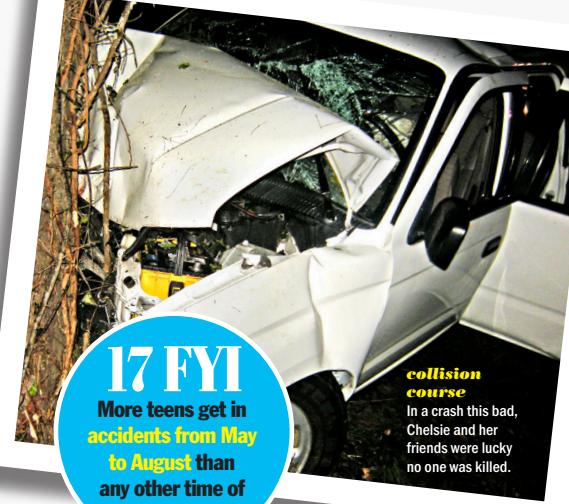
“A jolt of panic shot through my body as we headed straight for a tree!”

When I got home, I was still in complete denial. I'd open the door to step out of the car and then remember I'm stuck in this chair. Once, I totally broke down, throwing pillows and hitting my legs. I'd bottled up all this anger and frustration toward my injury, and I couldn't put on a brave face anymore. I was so fed up with my body.

But the idea of going back to school was exciting—I just wanted to get back some sense of normalcy—though I was really self-conscious about how people would react to my wheelchair. People kept offering to carry my books or grab stuff I couldn't reach, but that made me feel worse, like a burden. Prom was especially hard. I'd always pictured myself dancing all night and having a blast with my friends. It couldn't have been more different.



dancing queen
Not even a bulky back brace could keep Chelsie from enjoying the last dance of the night.



17 FYI
More teens get in accidents from May to August than any other time of the year!

collision course
In a crash this bad, Chelsie and her friends were lucky no one was killed.

Watching from my chair while my friends were out on the dance floor made me feel less than everyone else. But during the last song, my date picked me up in his arms and we

danced together. In that moment, I didn't feel different. I was just me again.

moving forward

It's been two years and I'm completely independent now, although I don't know if I'll ever accept the fact that I won't walk again. Aaron, the driver, went to prison for what he did. [He was sentenced to more than seven years in prison for drunk driving.] But I don't blame him. I take responsibility for getting in the car with him, and I want to make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else. I've been touring schools, speaking to more than 10,000 people about what happened to me. It's given me a purpose. If I have to live the rest of my life with this wheelchair as a reminder of one bad decision, it's a decision I don't want anyone else to make. 17

TUNE IN!
Chelsie is being featured in the new series *Push Girls*, premiering on the Sundance Channel on June 5!

PROM PROMISE

It's party season, but we want you to get home safely! *Seventeen*, Sundance Channel, and SADD have partnered on a pledge to protect your prom night at facebook.com/seventeen. Tell your friends!