

Spring break trip turns ugly

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Accident injures GHS students, parents headed to Salt Lake City.

The interstate highway near Rock Springs, WY, slices through a dry, desolate area dotted with sagebrush and oil extraction equipment.

In the darkness of night last Thursday, a Suburban piled with four Gothenburg High School students, parents and belongings barreled down Interstate 80 on a spring break trip to Salt Lake City, UT.

It had been snowing earlier, according to senior Zac Franzen who was driving, but the group had driven out of the storm.

About 30 minutes away from the southwestern Wyoming oil-rich city of Rock Springs, Zac felt the wheels of Suburban slip.

“I felt it catch and three seconds later, I realized I-80 was completely covered with ice. We started fishtailing,” he said.

When the back of the vehicle began sliding sideways, Zac said his nerves were on edge.

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“A lot of stuff goes through your head,” he said.

Once the Suburban entered the ditch and rolled, he could hear glass shattering.

Fellow friend and senior Scott Speck was sleeping in the front passenger seat as the car sped down the highway about 1 a.m.



Scott was then violently awakened after the Suburban hit what he described as black ice and the vehicle left the highway and began to roll.

Black ice, according to Weather.com, is thin, transparent ice that can cover road surfaces.

The Suburban finally landed on its top after turning over 2 times, Scott said.

Zac remembers hearing the engine roar when the Suburban came to a stop so he shut off the ignition.

His father Troy—who was in the second seat with senior Patrick Reeves—started a roll call to make sure everyone was all right.

Troy was the first out into the frigid night followed by Patrick and Troy’s wife Heather. Troy then pulled his daughter Makayla—a GHS sophomore—from the car.

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Scott said he knew his right arm was broken when the car quit rolling. He also suffered a cut to the head that required stitches.

“I was bleeding pretty bad,” he said.

Waiting for help was the coldest he and Scott have ever experienced, Franzen said.

Franzen was pinned in the vehicle by the steering wheel.

“They tried to get in a blanket but couldn’t get it past my head.”

After awhile, Troy pulled Scott from the vehicle but Zac had to wait about 45 minutes before rescuers and ambulances arrived with equipment to extract him.

“I was shivering and trying to hold still,” Zac said while he waited.

Although there is no cell phone service in the area, Scott said two ambulances stopped from another accident along the interstate.

In the meantime, he said a motorist stopped who offered his car to keep them warm.

Interestingly, Zac participated in a mock accident at Gothenburg High School a couple of years ago when students pretended to be involved in a fatal wreck after drinking and driving.

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“I remembered how they did it during this accident,” Zac said about his extraction from a car by the Jaws of Life.

In addition, because his neck and back hurt after the rollover, he told his family not to try and move him until medical help arrived.

The Franzens, Scott and Patrick then rode in the ambulances to a hospital in Rock Springs where they were treated and later released about 9 a.m.

Zac was diagnosed with a muscle strain and stretched and compacted vertebra.

Scott said Patrick received stitches in an arm, Makayla treated for a cut on her leg and Heather for a bruised rib while Troy had bumps and bruises.

After treatment, the group got a room at a Rock Springs motel where they recuperated and stayed Thursday night. Friend and neighbor Cody Peden arrived to drive them back to Gothenburg on Friday.

Both Zac and Scott said the accident would have been much more serious if everyone had not been wearing seat belts.

“Seat belts are major,” Zac said. “If I’d not been wearing one, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now.”

Seat belt use was instilled by Zac’s parents and grandparents, he said, noting that anyone who rides with him always has to buckle up.

Scott called seat belts life savers.

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Normally, Scott, Zac and Patrick would have skipped school Monday because of Senior Skip Day.

Instead they were still recuperating from the accident.

On his Internet Facebook site, Zac describes the incident as “Spring Break from Hell.”

However he must put it behind him to be ready to compete at the state speech meet in Kearney on Thursday.

Zac qualified in duet acting and serious prose while Makayla is part of an oral interpretation of drama team.

“Even if I was in wheelchair, I’d be going,” Franzen said.

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