

“Just Call Me

CRASH!”



Until 1995, Denise Wagoner was a part-time professional model...

...Today, she's the blind and permanently disfigured victim of her own drunk driving.

By Ken Testorff,
Naval Safety Center

That's the title of a video, available exclusively from Drunk Busters of America, that details the Denise Wagoner story. In the video, this former motel assistant manager and part-time professional



model shares a powerful message about drunk driving, drug abuse, alcoholism, and abusive relationships.

Denise's life changed Feb. 19, 1995. Upset about a dissolving relationship in her life, she had



visited her family. She still was upset when she started home and, en route, stopped at a tavern. Each time she emptied her glass, the bartender refilled it. To make matters worse, he seemed to be making advances. His actions only upset her more, so she left.

Police said Denise, with a BAC of .19, was going about 40 mph (in a 55-mph zone) when she missed a 90-degree turn in an S-curve and hit a culvert. Her car, a 1989 Ford Escort, went end-over-end three times and barrel-rolled twice before throwing her 70 feet. She landed on her head.

A woman at the scene of the accident described Denise's face as "five pounds of hamburger, and the blood bubbling from her mouth was the only evidence she still was alive. She had no nose or upper lip, and her eyes were dangling from their sockets." The 13 trauma doctors who worked on Denise that first night would learn that every bone in her face was broken, except for her bottom jaw.

Other injuries included multiple skull fractures, a broken back (in five places), two crushed vertebrae (in her neck), crushed ribs, and a swollen

brain. She also had broken shoulder blades, a broken collarbone, a broken left arm (in three places), and a broken right knee.

Later, a respirator in the hospital blew out one of her lungs, and the doctors found that

her skull was separated from her spine. They didn't think she would live through the next 24 hours, but if she did, they had to find out why she slowly was bleeding to death. She literally had "died" twice from loss of blood. They finally learned she suffered from DIC, a disease that prevents blood from clotting.

To repair Denise's lung and some of her other fractures, the doctors had to put her in a medically induced coma for five and a half weeks. They then put seven plates and 22 screws in her head and face, a process that



took nearly 18 hours.

One day, Denise's mother told a nurse that her daughter didn't smell very good. The doctors further explored her injuries and learned her scalp was separated from her skull. Then, she developed pneumonia and had to be fed only by IVs before doctors discovered more breaks in her legs and back.

"No one really thought I was going to live," said Denise. "I was given the last rites, and the doctors told my family I only had hours to live. However, I defied the inevitable and, in time, learned to walk and talk. I also learned to eat, dress and take care of myself." What does she credit for this miracle? "I really think we all have an angel on our shoulder."

The sad thing about this tragedy, according to Denise, "is that it was preventable. I did this to myself; I made the choice to drink and drive. They say that people will drive drunk 300 times before they are caught. I'd probably done it 3,000 times." In the first six months after moving back to her home state (Wisconsin) from California, Denise had been stopped twice for drunk driving. "But then, for three years, I hardly drank," she explained.

Today, Denise doesn't drink or smoke, and she says, "I'm the happiest I've ever been. I don't take life for granted anymore. I've learned to appreciate my family and friends."

Denise has launched a personal campaign to combat drinking and driving by speaking to driver's-education classes, schools, drug- and alcohol-abuse centers, and the Wisconsin National Guard. "I tell them a drunk driver did this to me," she said. "Then, I tell them the drunk driver was me. I'll be paying for the rest



of my life because of my choice, and I want to help others avoid that tragedy." ❦

Thanks to Denise Wagoner and to Curt Kindschuh, president of Drunk Busters of America, L.L.C., for their permission to use this story and all the related photos. Denise is available for speaking engagements by calling (920) 924-9857. For more information about Drunk Busters of America, visit their website at www.drunkbusters.com.—Ed.