

DeWitt cyclist Jill Byelich died because of a distracted driver. Her image reminds us to pay attention.

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LANSING – The message is simple and profound.

“DeWitt cyclist.

Wife.

Mother.

Killed by a distracted driver.”

The words accompany a large photo of Jill Byelich on two billboards that just went up on Kalamazoo Street near Francis Street and on Cedar Street south of Edgewood Boulevard in Lansing.

As more cyclists hit the road this spring, it’s a stark reminder to drivers that getting distracted puts lives on the line.



One of two new billboards put up in honor of Jill Byelich, the DeWitt cyclist and mother of two who was killed on September 2, 2014 by a distracted driver, is photographed on Wednesday, April 18, 2019, on Kalamazoo Street near the intersection of Francis Street in Lansing. (Photo: Nick King/Lansing State Journal)

That's what happened to Byelich, 35, who died riding her bike on Sept. 2, 2014. She was out for an evening bike ride when she was hit by a car from behind on West Howe Road.

The driver, Mitzi Nelson, who was just 23 when she was sentenced, was convicted of a misdemeanor for using her cellphone while driving.

She was ordered to serve 90 days in jail and two years' probation. The case drew widespread attention when a Clinton County judge ordered Nelson not to use a cellphone during her time on probation.

'Positive message' out of tragedy

Jill Byelich, who worked as a grants adviser for the Michigan State Police, had only recently started riding her bike again, said Jordan Byelich, the late woman's husband.

She was out for a spin, just three or four miles near her home. She wore a reflective vest and helmet, and she rode where she was supposed to — on the right edge of the road.

Jordan, also a state employee, agreed to allow his late wife's image to be used to help prevent other deaths.

"I think she would have wanted to know she could help make a difference," he said. "While unfortunate and tragic it is and always will be for myself and my family, there's a positive message that comes out of it."

He has remarried and moved to Haslett. His two sons, Tristan, 11, and Nolan, 8, are doing well, he said, and he also has two stepchildren now.

Ride of Silence

Jill Byelich and others who died or were injured while biking will be honored in a May 15 "Greater Lansing Ride of Silence" from Michigan State University to the Capitol, said Tim Potter of the Tri-County Bicycle Association.

The ride will be one of 400 held worldwide to raise awareness for cyclist safety. Registration runs from 5:15 p.m. to 6:15 p.m. and the ride will start at 6:30 p.m.

Michigan already bans texting while driving, and last year the "Safe Passing Law" went into effect, which requires drivers to allow at least three feet of space between the vehicle and the bike while passing. If that's not possible, the law requires as safe as possible to the left of the cyclist.

The law came in response to the deaths of five cyclists after they were hit by a car in Kalamazoo in 2016. Michigan was one of the last states to pass such a law and bicyclists wanted a five-foot space.

Distracted driving deaths up

Distracted driving is a growing concern.

Michigan had a 57% increase in distracted driving crashes and a 67% increase in distracted driving fatalities from 2016 to 2017, according to the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning.

Deaths rose from 43 in 2016 to 72 in 2017.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has called for a distracted driver law banning all but hands-free use of cellphones.

Potter, who routinely rides his bike along Grand River, said he believes the “Safe Passing Law” is making a difference. He experiences fewer near misses and drivers who honk or shake their fists at him, he said.

He said he hopes that remembering Jill will help.

“It’s the time of the year where a lot of people are getting out on their bikes,” he said. “It’s an important reminder to be mindful that the roads are used by a lot of different people and not just motor vehicles.”

For more information about the Ride of Silence, check the Facebook event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/605410253217067/>

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