

# An American Auto Safety Tragedy

By Paula Lawlor

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Every year in the United States 10,000 people die in rollover accidents and 16,000 are catastrophically injured. Why do rollovers cause such a high percentage of serious injuries and fatalities? This very question has been answered repeatedly in internal vehicle manufacturer documents that date back over four decades: **poorly designed vehicles that do not provide adequate roof strength during a rollover are dangerous and deadly.**

Despite the industry's historical internal data that stronger roofs save lives, the vehicle industry has made a concerted effort in roof crush litigation to suggest that a strong roof provides no meaningful safety benefit.

Consequently, most of the vehicle industry has been selling vehicles the last 36 years that have inadequately reinforced roof structures that result in roof collapse which has caused thousands of needless deaths, quadriplegia, paraplegia and catastrophic brain injuries. In short, American consumers are being deceived about the strength and safety of their roof structures. This deception has existed for the last 36 years.

On July 14, 2002, Claudette Phillips (39 years old) was wearing her seat belt while driving her 1993 Jeep Grand Cherokee. Her 5 year old daughter Tyson was seat belted in her child seat. They were traveling on the I-15 in the County of San Bernardino, California on their way to Nevada. In an avoidance maneuver the Jeep left the roadway and rolled over. The roof of the vehicle crushed excessively into Claudette's survival space and rendered her a quadriplegic.



From the scene Claudette was airlifted to University Medical Center in Las Vegas where she spent 15 days in intensive care. She was transported to Kaiser Hospital in Los Angeles for 1 month and then spent 2 months in rehabilitation at Northridge Hospital and 3 weeks in Country Villa Nursing Home.

Claudette is a complete quadriplegic. Her paralysis is from her neck down. From hospitals in California she went back to Tennessee where her mother Yvonne and her sister Madeline could take care of her. Health care in the State of Tennessee is practically non-existent.

Claudette's biggest loss was her ability to be a mom and take care of her little daughter Tyson. After the



**8-year-old Tyson visiting her mom Claudette over Spring break in 2005**

accident Tyson remained in California with her father and comes about 3 or 4 times a year to visit her mom in Memphis. Claudette is very diligent in trying to guide her child from a distance - she often helps Tyson with her homework on the phone as she has copies of Tyson's school books and talks to her as often as she can.

Claudette has always had a passion for reading, music and the theatre. Although she has had to give up most of that she is still an avid reader. With a book propped up on a pillow and a stick in her mouth to turn the pages, Claudette has been able to satisfy her love for reading. Just recently with the assistance of **Dragon Naturally Speaking software**, a voice recognition program, Claudette is able to read and write to her heart's content on her laptop.



**Claudette Phillips a year or so before her accident**

In 1981 Claudette graduated from Central High School in Memphis, Tennessee where she was an active member of student government. She got a scholarship to Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts and served as President of her freshman class. Claudette studied English Literature and Ancient History. She studied at the Sorbonne in Paris for a year as part of the Smith exchange program and graduated from Smith in 1985.

In 1997, after the birth of her child Tyson, Claudette moved to Glendale, California. She worked for Russ Reid in Pasadena as a fundraiser for charitable organizations including The Red Cross, Christian Children's Fund and American Bible Society.

Claudette is an amazing human being. In her incredible situation she thinks of others before herself. She has a truly beautiful spirit.

Claudette waits patiently for her day in court where she will face the auto manufacturer of her 1993 Jeep Grand Cherokee - **DaimlerChrysler Corporation**. Claudette's trial by jury is scheduled for sometime in 2007 in Southern California.