Alumni

Why Cars Are More Dangerous for Women

Drive US Forward, founded by Maria Weston Kuhn ’23CC, is fighting for more accurate female crash-test dummies.

By
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Simoul Alva

Maria Weston Kuhn ’23CC had a truly terrifying experience on what should have been a perfect family getaway. While traveling in Ireland in December 2019, she survived a head-on collision when a distracted driver veered into the wrong lane on a country road. Her father and brother, sitting in the front of the rental car, were

unharmed, while Kuhn and her mother, sitting in the back, suffered severe injuries. “My small intestine was ruptured by my seatbelt, and I required emergency surgery,” says Kuhn, who, after returning home to Maine, was forced to miss a semester of college. “I found out later that our injuries were not unique. Crashes affect women differently because car safety standards are tailored to men. It’s a form of gender discrimination that injures and kills thousands of women each year.”

Since her recovery, Kuhn has become a bold advocate for women’s safety in automobile regulation. As a student studying political science and psychology, she spent numerous hours writing op-eds and lobbying public officials for updated crash-test standards. Now, as the founder and president of Drive US Forward, a newly formed nonprofit, she is steering a spirited awareness campaign about this little-known but alarming gender disparity.

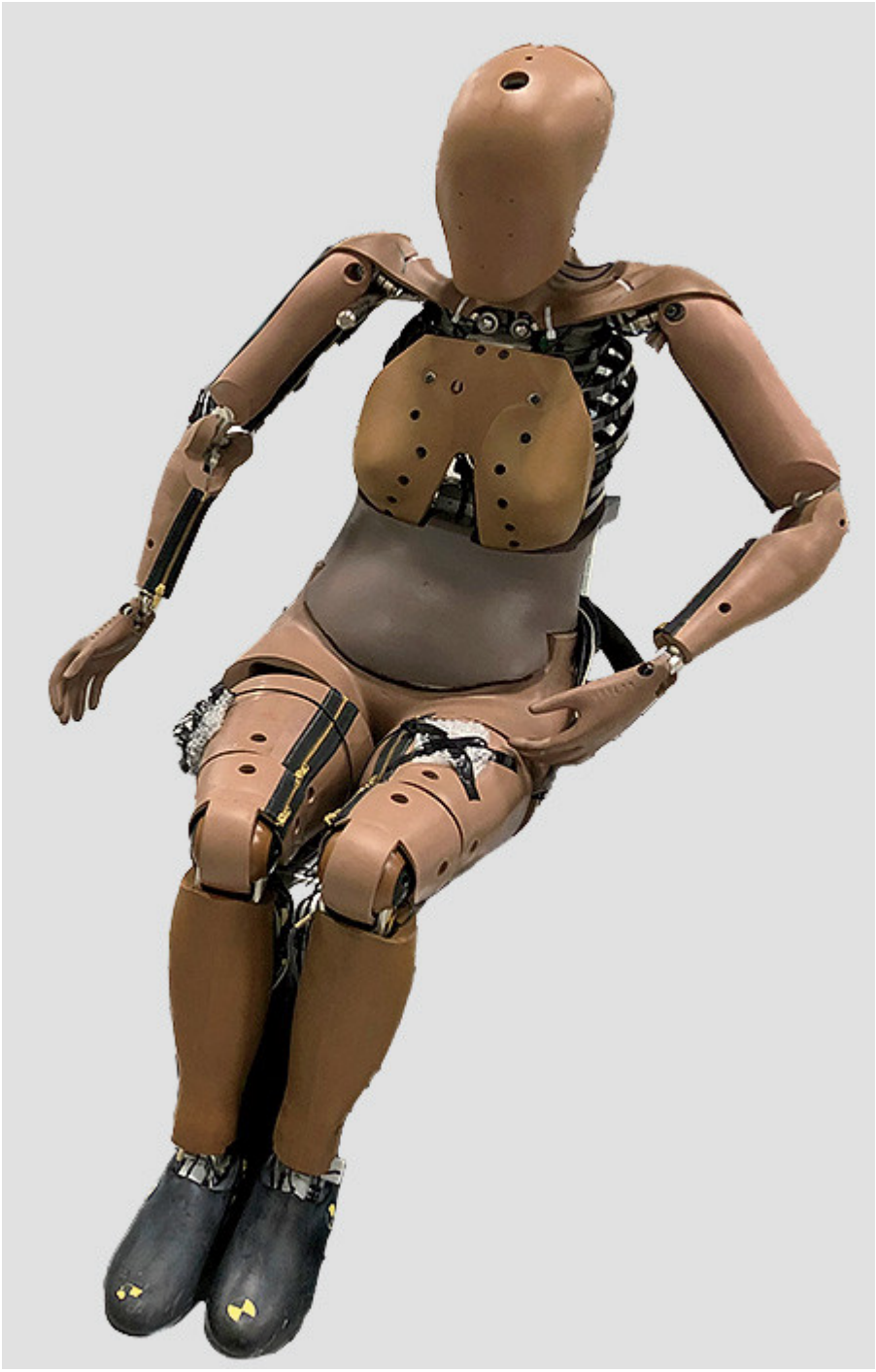


Maria Weston Kuhn

“Women are 73 percent more likely to be injured and 17 percent more likely to be killed in frontal collisions than men,” explains Kuhn. This is inevitable, she argues, since the crash-test dummies used in the US Department of Transportation’s New Car Assessment Program, which tests and rates vehicles for safety, are modeled

after the average male in the 1970s. The standard dummy is a man of five foot nine and 171 pounds, while its female counterpart is a scaled-down replica that “doesn’t account for different proportions, musculature, and bone mass,” Kuhn says. Despite the fact that women make up over half of American motorists, the female dummy never sits in the driver’s seat during frontal crash tests.

A more anatomically accurate female dummy was approved by the Department of Transportation in late 2022, but budget constraints are delaying its rollout, explains Kuhn. The device, called the THOR-5F, contains additional sensors in the abdomen, pelvis, and other areas where women are particularly vulnerable. “We’re advocating for the New Car Assessment Program to test the THOR-5F equally with the male dummy and to get it in the driver’s seat,” she says.



The THOR-5F dummy. (Wikimedia Commons)

Since launching this past March, Drive US Forward has set out to educate the public through social media and by collaborating with other grassroots organizations like Gen-Z for Change, with the goal of influencing lawmakers. “Once you tell somebody about the issue, you don’t need to persuade them,” asserts Kuhn, who during college learned the ropes of the political system as a policy intern for the US Senate. “Transportation policy can be very mundane and hidden from public view,” adds

Marco Balestri ’22CC, Kuhn’s friend and a legal advocate who serves on Drive US Forward’s executive board. “This is a problem that can be fixed so easily. But there isn’t enough awareness.”

Hana Schank ’04SOA, a writer and expert in public-interest technology, has partnered with Kuhn for several years and now acts as an adviser to Drive US Forward. “The car industry did not fight for seat belts; consumer advocate Ralph Nader did,” says Schank, who survived a head-on collision and traumatic brain injury just five months before Kuhn’s accident. “The US is now lagging behind other countries in this effort.”

Kuhn, inspired by youth-focused movements like March for Our Lives for gun reform, is eager to mobilize members of her generation. “We’re trying to pull the curtain back and give young people a voice in transportation policy,” she says. “Road injuries are a leading cause of death across the country, and it’s time to address the fatal inequities in crash-safety testing.”

This article appears in the Fall 2023 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title* "*Car Safety for Dummies.*"

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