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Matt and Leigh Ann Wilson sit with their kids, Nolan and Odette. The family has donated their time and money to various causes over the years, including giving to the United Way of York County Community Fund.

York County family's life-changing car crash inspires them to give back

by OUR YORK MEDIA

Matt Wilson can't remember the crash. Leigh Ann Wilson will never forget it.

On his way up I-83 North toward Mechanicsburg on March 9, 2018, a pickup truck rammed into Matt's car, thrusting the trunk into the back seat and knocking him unconscious. Leigh Ann heard it all through the phone: a loud crunch, then silence.

"I started screaming for someone to pick up the phone," Leigh Ann remembers.

A nurse two cars back came to help and heard Leigh Ann through the speaker.

"Your husband's alive," she told her. "The ambulance is arriving now."

A medevac helicopter flew Matt to Hershey Medical Center, where doctors treated him for significant whiplash and a small brain bleed. It took several staples to close the gashes in the back of his head.

'What if...?'

After months of physical, occupational, and speech therapy, Matt made a full recovery. He was cleared to return to work.



The Wilson family admits they were lucky after Matt's incident. During the process, they had the same thought: What happens to people who aren't as fortunate?



The couple admits they were lucky — and not just with Matt's health. They were able to afford the hospital bills, and Matt's employer, UPMC Pinnacle, kept him on payroll. During the process, they had the same thought: What happens to people who aren't as fortunate?

"So many people in York County are living paycheck to paycheck and don't have the financial backing like we did," Leigh Ann says.

For years, the Wilsons donated their time and money to various causes, including giving to the United Way of York County Community Fund, which supports 67 programs run by United Way's 36 Partner Agencies. Leigh Ann believes that goodwill gave them karma during the crash.

"I always wondered if that little piece of doing something good spared Matt's life," she says.

Making an impact

In 2019, the Wilsons, in their 30s, became two of the youngest members of the Alexis de Tocqueville Society — the highest level of giving at United Way, for donors who contribute \$10,000 and above.

"We decided to make an impact on those who wouldn't be so protected in those situations," she says.

Through their giving, the Wilsons established an endowment at the UPMC Pinnacle Foundation called "The Brain Matters," which helps those suffering with brain injuries cover hospital bills and ensures neurologists in Central Pennsylvania have the right technology and education for treatment. Additionally, they're developing a scholarship at Juniata College, their alma mater. The "Life is Short" scholarship will help students who lost a parent, a nod to Leigh Ann, who lost her mother to colon cancer when she was 21.

"Sure, we're comfortable and could knock our debt down, but we decided we need to give back," Leigh Ann says. "We feel the more you give back, the more you get back."

A legacy of helping

The Wilsons hope the endowments leave a legacy of helping others.

"We're not Mr. Glatfelter or Mr. Appell, but even giving on a smaller level can impact others' lives," Leigh Ann says. "We've had our fair share of tragedy, but other people have harder lives, and we'd like to make it easier for them if we can."

The Wilsons find ways beyond the endowments to give back to their community. Leigh Ann spends hours volunteering, and Matt coaches children.

Their two kids, Nolan and Odette, find their own ways to make a difference. Nolan donates to animal charities and volunteers with his Cub Scout Pack, while Odette asks for books for her birthday to donate to other children.

"Giving back in any form brings happiness to the family," Matt says.

"Think of it like a birthday or Christmas. Sure, it's nice to get presents, but seeing the joy on someone's face when you know you're giving them a present they needed is extremely rewarding."

